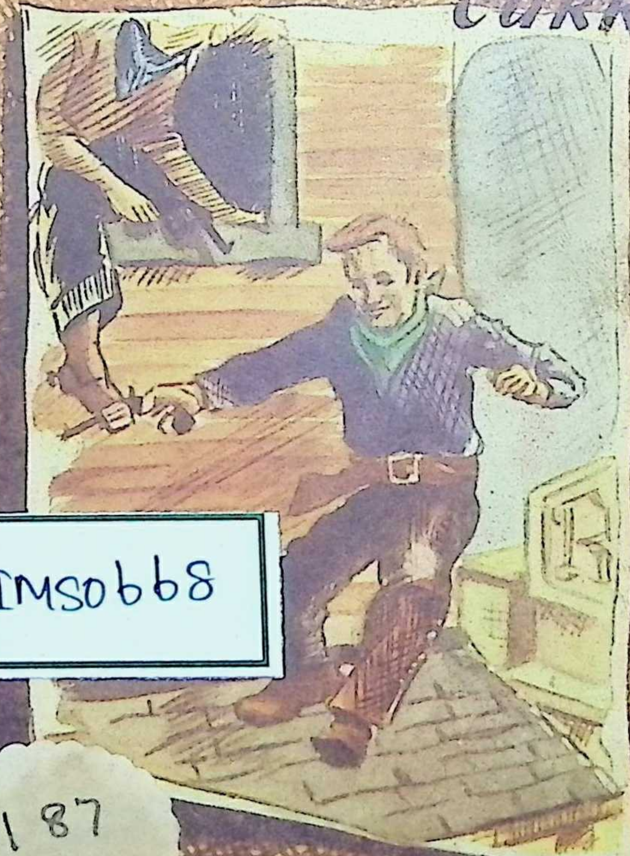
The LAST BULLET

TEX CURRA



…ir was red the strangers mistook Red for Red Considine, a gunman they wished to hire. So Red played along with them and uncovered a bitter feud and a ruthless gang of killers, who terrorized a whole community.

COLLINS WHITE CIRCLE POCKET NOVEL

Adventure

THE ANGRY SPUT of a bullet as it whizzed past Red's head to flatten itself against a rock, was the first indication of trouble on the trail. When two newcomers came into view their explanation was certainly not reassuring. Because his hair was as red as his name the strangers took Red to be none other than Red Considine, who was out to do a job of killing. But Red thought that perhaps after all he was the man they were after—an alarming thought for a man with a clear conscience. If you like Western stories you will revel in this stirring romance, which begins with a single bullet and ends with a veritable fusillade.

PRICE IN INDIA
FOURTEEN ANNAS



THE LAST BULLET

TEX CURRAN



WILD WEST CLUB

WILLIAM COLLINS, SONS AND CO., LTD.
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CHAPTER I

Traded Bullets

Stepping as lightly and as softly as a cat, the youngster climbed the stair-like rock and, without hoisting his hat on his gun to determine whether the other man was ready to shoot, he raised himself till his head and his shoulders were above the rim.

He was guilty of a daring, even a reckless act, but he seemed to have full confidence in himself. He was the kind of man who pulls through by such acts—or dies attempting them. He showed no excitement, and that was in his favour. Coolness was essential to his success. A lesser man probably would have resorted to a trick, but he appeared to scorn tricks; and that indicated a clearness of mind in addition to a fine control of body.

For perhaps two minutes the intense silence of the hot noonday prevailed. Even the silence and the heat did not, in these first few moments, disturb the youngster. He seemed oblivious to everything save his single intention.

Then there was the *sput* of a bullet on the rock, five feet to one side of the youngster's head.

He heard the report of the shot come from a clump of trees below and beyond him, and he immediately sent a bullet through the tops of those low trees.

Another bullet flattened itself against the rock, nearer him this time. He returned that fire, and now his bullet tore in among the trees at a height no greater than that of a tall man. Since he was above the spot at which the other firing was coming, his bullet took a downward course, and he believed that it might strike the chest of his opponent.

Silence, inaction from below followed, but the youngster did not change his position, did not relax his vigilance. He proved himself a man who, despite recklessness, took nothing for granted.

"That one was too close to you for comfort, wasn't it, ol'-timer?" he said aloud.

His speaking aloud was involuntary, and he suddenly grinned. That grin was the grin of youth and disclosed that the youngster had a sense of humour. It was so strong that the deadly business he was about could not quell it. In fact, it seemed to increase as he said, again aloud: "Goin' bughouse, are you, fella? I've heard that talkin' to yourself is a sign o' that."

He waited for a little to see whether the silence down there would continue, and when it did, he emptied his gun and

refilled it. There had been no apparent necessity for that emptying of his gun, but he liked to give full measure when he was up against a situation like this.

Staring at the clump of trees, he let the gun lie before him, its long barrel resting on the rock just below his chin.

After those sharp reports the silence seemed intensified. The youngster could hear nothing. Above him the sky was a vast, untouched, blue bowl. At the zenith the sun blazed so brightly that even a single, quick look at it would bring tears to one's eyes. The youngster kept his own eyes covered by his hat brim.

The rock upon which he lay was hot to the touch. He would have said you could fry an egg on it. Heat waves shimmered on the flat below. Dust lay heavily on the leaves of the trees and on the sage. The bunch grass, too, was grayish. There had been a sand storm a few days back and no rain since. No wind had blown either, so that the dust lay wherever it had settled.

These heaped-up rocks and the single clump of trees below him made the only breaks in the flat, which stretched away till it was lost in the gray-blue of the horizon on all sides. The rocks were only some twenty feet in height, and they were saw-toothed all along their length. At one end, behind the youngster, there was a hard incline up which a horse could make its way, but at the other end there was a sheer drop down to the sand.

Below the rim to which the youngster had climbed, there was a little level space on the rock, and on this two horses stood with heads drooping in the heat. One was a neat sorrel mare, the youngster's own, equipped with plain but expensive leather. The sun struck gold into her glossy coat. The other, which had only accidentally come into the youngster's possession a few minutes before, was a very ugly pinto.

Its gaudy coat was so rough that it looked as if it had never been touched by brush or comb, a typical travelling horse. A band of white ran from the thigh to saddle and again from saddle to shoulder. On the elbow there was a leathery patch where the hair had been worn away. The nostrils had a pinched look, the lips were dry, and the eyes red. A bad actor, that horse, one would have said.

Since there were no more shots, the youngster holstered his gun and reached up and pulled the broad brim of his hat lower over his eyes. For a space he stared out from under the brim. There was no sign of life among the trees. Indeed there had been none at any time except for the firing.

The youngster continued his staring, showing that he could be thorough. He wanted to observe any stir there might be among the trees, even though it might come tardily.

The trees made a shadow on the ground, a thin shadow because of the position of the sun; but he had a notion that he

might see the flash in that shadow if there was another shot. Five minutes passed, and still the silence held. It then occurred to the youngster that the man who had tried to kill him might be seeking escape by crawling away among the trees. He could put them between himself and the youngster for a brief time, but it was possible that he would take the chance. The youngster had no very high opinion of the man's courage or intelligence.

So the youngster let his gaze travel along the clump in both directions. Still there was no stir. The youngster debated whether he should descend and investigate. He swiftly decided against that. His recklessness would not carry him to the point of folly. That fellow down there might be expecting just such a move.

After waiting a while longer, the youngster lifted his head and looked away across the far-stretching flat. At first there seemed to be no life out there, but then he made out what was little more than a moving speck. He pushed back his hat brim and stared out of eyes which were used to long distances.

" Hell," he said softly. " How did that happen ? "

He believed, for the moment, that his enemy had escaped, though he could not understand how that could have been. There could have been no escape, he was convinced, without the making of a slight sound. And the departing man must have come into view in just a little while.

Because of the intensity of the sunlight, that was an uncertain speck. Sometimes it was there definitely and then it seemed to dance away. For a while the youngster watched this coming and going, this sudden appearance and this vanishing, and then the speck was gone altogether, as if it had suddenly been blown away.

The youngster's keen eyes had never played a trick like this before. He did not know what an illusion was. He either saw a thing or he didn't see it. Damn it, he was *not* excited. He was as cool as he had ever been in his life. He had been cool all along. He took another look, but there was no speck.

" Seein' things ? " he asked himself.

He took off his hat and scratched his head, careless of the fact that he was now a fair target. He *felt* that no one was below him now. That feeling was as safe a guide as the senses of sight or hearing.

Beneath his hat his hair had seemed to be brown, but in the sunlight it was all at once a deep red. Below brows which the sun gave a red tinge to also, there were large, cool gray eyes. The face was a little thin. In fact, the whole light body seemed to be drawn a trifle fine, and the skin was too clear and smooth for a man who had sojourned in this country in the heat of summers. The leathery look, the fine lines which sun and wind bring, were missing.

" Now where did that hombre out there get another horse ? "

he mused. "I thought I had him afoot for some time to come."

He restored his hat to his head and frowned thoughtfully across the flat.

"Why, doggone it," he said, "he was waiting for me! That's it. And he even went so far as to have a second horse hidden out! Wasn't taking any chances. Good thing he missed that first shot."

He visualized what had happened. He had been riding below the ragged rocks. As he had reached the sheer drop of them at one end, a bullet had sped uncomfortably close, past his head. Apparently whoever had fired the shot had expected it to take effect. There had not been, immediately, another shot.

That had been a clue for the youngster. There was only one man hereabouts, so far as he knew, who would want to kill him. That man could put a bullet about where he pleased. Probably when he had fired, he had dropped his hand, and, with a grin on his lips, had waited to see the youngster clap a hand on the horn, roll for a moment in the saddle, and then topple to the ground.

Not being hit, the youngster had of course done none of these things. He had wheeled his horse, and the faithful animal had borne him into the shelter of the rocks in a few great leaps. As he was about to put the sorrel mare up the slope, so that he could command a view of the trees from which he judged the shot had come, there had been a sudden clatter of hoofs behind him.

He had looked back and the pinto had swept into view.

He saw that the horse had come off the sand and upon the rocky floor in a wild gallop. Probably he had been frightened by that single shot and had sought to flee to safety. The taste of freedom had been in its mouth, too, and that had lent fleetness to it.

To take up the pinto would necessitate the youngster's exposing himself, but there again he had not hesitated. This was too good a joke on the unseen sharpshooter. He would be afoot while the youngster would have two horses. So he had sent the mare alongside the pinto, had scooped up the reins, and had slowed him from his gallop.

The hidden man must have been taken by surprise at first, and anger and chagrin must later have held him motionless, for the youngster had sent the mare up the incline, leading the pinto and had gained to security without having been fired upon once more.

He had, however, immediately exposed himself and had sent four fast bullets crashing in among the trees. The hidden man had later returned the fire till he had probably crawled out from among the trees, somehow materialized a horse, and fled away across the flat, in which flight the

youngster had just now momentarily caught sight of him.

The youngster remained puzzled, and he did not like to be puzzled. He liked to have everything right out in the open. He gave a last regretful look to the trees. He would have given anything to know whether that man was lying dead among them. He was sure that he was not there alive now. If he had been he would have taken advantage of his greater opportunity.

"Well," said the youngster, "that's the end of that chapter."

"Yuh think so?"

The low, hoarse voice came from below and back of him. He went motionless, pressing his body against the rock in front of him. He was, he feared, caught. What a fool he had been! That speck out there hadn't been the man in flight. It had been another horseman, or just possibly a mirage of the sun-soaked flat.

The sharpshooter had evidently crept out of the trees, around the rocks, and thus up on him. Doubtless he had him covered with a gun now. The tone had been that of an insolent man who was sure that the odds were all in his favour and who intended decisive action.

For a while the youngster waited for the man to speak again. He thought he knew the breed. The man would not at once shoot, since the advantage was now all his. He would want to play with his captive for a while, to impress on the captive how clever he was and how great a fool the other.

It then dawned upon the youngster that he must use the time thus given him. If the man decided to kill him, he would reach his decision suddenly, and his bullet would follow in the next split second. And that split second might be hurrying on. It might be a part of any of the precious seconds which were to follow.

Sudden anger, however, brought a flush to the youngster's cheeks. He had gone practically into the open to meet this fellow, and the fellow had played the part of a sneak. Why hadn't he fought it out when he had been screened by the trees? No nerve! He was simply a cowardly pup. Cowardly pups were easy when the odds were even; they were terribly dangerous when they had the swing of things.

However, the youngster had to be cautious. It was, he thought, wise to set caution over against trickery. A cautious man was merely using his head. This man, as he well knew, was a killer. He would, without the slightest compunction, throw a bullet into the back of another man. He had tried to shoot the youngster down without warning.

Even as the youngster decided to make the sign of peace, he nevertheless also determined to have a look. He had no liking for being caught like this, held up, with a big gun probably pointed at his body.

So he put his hands as high as his shoulders and turned his head and looked down.

His own eyes immediately looked into a pair of muddy eyes down there. Coldly, slowly, the youngster's eyes travelled up and down an uncouth figure. A dilapidated hat was set above a square, red face with a stubble of black beard on cheek and chin. A blue shirt, opened down the chest, revealed that the chest was hairy and had above it a thick, short neck with heavy veins in it. Dirty overalls were tucked into rundown boots.

The youngster immediately classed that man. He was one of those dumb brutes that took pride in indications of physical strength. That, more than because of the heat, was the reason the shirt was open. The man was proud that he was a hairy ape.

A feeling of slight nausea came to the youngster. He despised men like this one, possibly because he was so unlike him himself. *He* prided himself on his slim cleanliness. That state, he believed, made for clearness of mind. He was tempted to grin, for he guessed he could get the better of this fellow, if not at once then later.

Then he was surprised that the man had no gun in his hand. He simply stood there at his ease, what was probably meant for an ingratiating smile on his lips. The lips were thick and unhealthy-looking. Even against the black beard they showed a sort of gray instead of red. The man had big blunt teeth and these were stained as from tobacco juice. Indeed, even now, he fished a red-banded package from his hip pocket and stowed a generous stringy bunch of tobacco into his cheek. He spat at once, thrusting his chin over his shoulder and taking his eyes from the youngster's face.

That youngster was amazed, and then his amazement was overtaken by understanding. This poor sucker was trying to fool him. He was indulging himself in what he thought was a great cleverness. He would play like this for a while and then he would try to take the youngster prisoner. It was, the youngster silently asserted, one hell of a note. Why, the man could see his gun in its holster. Did he think it would take him a week to get it out?

'What kind of a jam yuh in, Red?" the man asked, that sickening smile again coming to his gross lips. "Whatcha indulgin' yoreself in so much gunplay for? Bullets costs money that could be spent for liquor. Haw, haw, Red, you don't know what money is for."

The youngster continued to look coldly, steadily out of his big gray eyes. If he was bewildered, he did not show it. His face seemed, in fact, to tighten a little; it looked older, as if he had slipped a mask of age over that youthful countenance.

The man nodded, as if that look gave him infinite satisfaction, and a dry chuckle sounded in his throat. Red's face

cleared. Apparently the fellow meant no gun-play at all. Still he might be the man who had fired from among the trees. He might be merely trying to prove that he was not. That would be a part of his general attempt at cleverness.

" Been watchin' you for some time, Red," the man went on. " Knowed yuh soon as yuh done took off your hat. Who was you swappin' bullets with ? Did yuh get yore man ? I sh'd think yuh would of. You fired often enough. Mebbe he's layin' dead down yonder, huh ? Let's have the inside o' the matter, Red. Mebbe you'll need a hand. I can see yo're brave as the bravest, but still an' all a brave man can find he ain't gettin' the breaks ; an' if he don't get the breaks, where is he ? Why, he just ain't. Come on, Red. Spill it."

The youngster took papers and tobacco from the breast pocket of his shirt and rolled a slow cigarette. His eyes were narrowed as he put it into his mouth and touched a thumb-flicked match to it. He let the cigarette prevent his answering the man.

The man seemed not to mind, for he continued : " Lemme give yuh a warnin', Red. You took a long shot climbin' up there into view like yuh done. You coulda crep' up easy an' slow an' have played a trick or two that woulda fooled that fella. He mighta got you. He musta been a slouch with a gun. Ain't that right ? "

" Did you ever figure out anything right ? " Red asked, removing the cigarette.

" You are gettin' hard with me, Red," the man said, without resentment. " No reason for that. I coulda put a gun on yuh, yuh know. I didn't. I just spoke to yuh, ca'm an' peaceful. Not many men woulda done that. For their own pertection, they woulda covered yuh an' have kep' yuh covered till things was all straightened out. But that ain't my way. I go slow mebbe but I go sure. I ain't never been fooled in a man yet."

" No ?" Red drawled.

The youngster's body jerked very slightly. His eyes narrowed still more, as if he were commanding the lids to rigidity. To control the start he moved slightly.

" Fella," he said in a low voice, " you're full of words. You got a gun stuck in your waistband, inside your shirt, but that don't make no matter. You can see where my gun is hangin'. The inside o' that holster is as slick as grease. Your questions don't make no hit with me. Let's hear about *you !*"

CHAPTER II

A Letter

The man, Red saw, was a stupid lout. Disdain did not touch him. He could not be moved out of his crude goodfellowship. Again that dry chuckle sounded in his throat. He glanced at the sorrel mare.

" Knowed you by yore horse, too, Red," he stated. " Ain't another such horse from Port Angeles to the border, I'm thinking."

" Why, sorrel mares is plenty," Red said. " You can see 'em wherever you go. Don't lie to me, fella. It won't get you nowhere. I've as good as got a gun on you this minute."

" I know you can draw, Red," the man agreed. " That's why I didn't come up on you with a gun in my hand. Even so, I was afraid you could get me an' I knowed you'd try. Yuh see, you ain't no stranger to me really. Where'd yuh get the pinto ? Take it away from Brinnon ? "

" Why, he's Brinnon's horse if that information will do you any good. But who are you, fella ? Don't keep me waitin'. I'm busy."

" Yuh been busy, for a fact," the man said. He stood looking at Red with his lips half open, so that they became stained with the tobacco juice. " Why——"

" For heaven's sake," Red broke in, disturbed in his fastidiousness, " wipe your lips. You make me think of an animal that has eaten too much."

The man obliged by wiping his lips with his handkerchief. The handkerchief looked as if he had carried it for a month.

" Honest to God, you're a little more than I can stomach !" Red exclaimed.

" I can see you're a clean young fella," the man apologized. " Well, men differs. Who am I ? you ask. Why, I'm Molliter. You get me now, don't you ? Blinky Skaggs is waitin' for us, down below."

There was not in Red's appearance any suggestion that he snatched that up. If he recalled anything, if he recognized the man before him, he gave no sign. Only a thin smile of amusement came to his lips and partly lighted his face. His contrast to the man who called himself Molliter was very great ; his youth was accentuated.

" You're a good-lookin' fella, Red," the man said. " Me, I ain't nothin' to brag about."

" What do you expect that to get you ?" Red demanded. " If you're trying to flatter me, quit it. I don't fall for that stuff. If you an' I have got any connection at all, it's a

business connection. Keep that in your mind. And now you *say* you're Molliter."

Molliter's eyes were lighted by a little flush of suspicion. Then the cloud in them darkened. The touch of suspicion, Red thought, had made the man a little more stupid than he had been before. It was difficult for his mind to take hold of anything and view it intelligently.

"Why, I ain't just *sayin'* I'm Molliter," he asserted. "I *am* Molliter. Yuh oughta know me, Red. You oughta been all prepared to take up with me. Didn't yuh get——"

He stopped and studied Red's face more carefully than he had done so far. Again the eyes were lighted but now alarm seemed to be the source of the light. He took a backward step. Red swiftly laughed.

"Yuh are Red, ain't yuh ?" Molliter asked.

"Thought you knew me from the first ?"

"You could say it."

"Men with hair like mine is generally called Red. So I'm Red."

"I mean *the* Red."

"Oh, all right. I'm *the* Red."

That seemed to reassure Molliter. The light in his eyes died, and he grinned rather sheepishly.

"What's on your mind about me, Red ?" he asked.

"It's just like this: You take a hell of a lot for granted. I don't. Go on with what you were going to say. Didn't I get what ?"

"The letter."

Red came lightly down the rocks. A keener man than this other might have suspected that he was merely trying to gain time, but Molliter understood physical activity better than he understood anything else. He seemed to be interested only in the swiftness and agility with which Red made the descent.

"They said you was smooth an' fast," Molliter said, "an' they didn't tell no lie. I can see that you could be fast with a gun, Red."

"That ain't no great recommendation for a man," Red stated.

Molliter stared. He was not fast with a gun, and he envied, more than he could express, men who were. He believed that if he had been fast, he could have made his fortune long before this. He daydreamed of himself as an active gunman. His daydreams were not far from being real delusions.

Red confronted him. The left corner of his mouth was lifted by what remained of his smile. His gray eyes sparkled humorously.

"You got a good streak o' fun in you, too, ain t you, Red ?" Molliter again attempted ingratiation.

"Some men are most dangerous when they smile," Red returned. "An' fella, you can't fish nothin' outa me. I

dunno who you are. You think I'm goin' to cough up to you just because you mention a letter? Why, letters is flashin' back and forth all over this country right this minute. I expect there's a million or more letters on the wing right now. You pick one letter outa all them and you think the mention of it is goin' to make me shoot off my mouth. I'll tell you——"

A little, healthy chuckle escaped him as he let his gun say it. He snapped out the gun and thrust it into Molliter's stomach. Molliter might have neglected what he would have called his brains, but he had not neglected his stomach. A fold of flesh lay over his belt, and it seemed to be sensitive flesh. It quivered beneath the touch of the gun. Molliter made a movement as if to raise his hands.

"Not necessary," Red said. "You couldn't get halfway to your gun. Now, what is it about this letter? I got a letter, yes. Who was it from?"

"Now, looka here——" Molliter began.

Red's eyes became cold and hard again. He pressed in the gun till Molliter winced.

"What I was gonna say was important," Molliter declared. "We don't wanta make no mistakes, do we?"

There was sense in that, Red saw. Certainly *he* wanted to make no mistakes. Everything was too important. He would have to discover how important what Molliter had in his mind was. "Go ahead," he said.

"S'pose yuh wasn't the Red I'm looking for," said Molliter. "Where would we be then?"

Red had to indulge in a hearty laugh and he answered: "Why, I'd be on the top of the heap, wouldn't I? I'd have had a reason to hold you up, and I've got you held up."

"I dunno what to do," Molliter admitted.

"You have no choice. Who was the letter from? Tell me that and I'll know you're on the level."

"Well, yes!" Molliter breathed a slow, thick sigh of relief. He swallowed so hard that his Adam's apple stood out in the flesh of his throat abundant though that flesh was. "That's good," he continued. "Why, the letter was from Walters, o' course."

"That's fair as far as it goes, but it don't go far enough. If you know about that letter, you must know Walters. All right! What for lookin' fella is he?"

"'Bout your age. Slim. Black hair, black eyes. Got a dinky little black moustache."

"C'rect! Well, what was in the letter?"

"On'y that Blinky an' me would come down here with the money. We was due here today an' here we are. Take down that gun, Red. It gives me a kind of shiver."

"Funny thing about me," Red retorted. "I keep a gun where I put it till I get ready to remove it. Where's Blinky

now? You look like a hundred other men, but I think I'd know Blinky from what Walters said in his letter."

"Blinky's below us. He has got a bad leg, yuh know. When I heard the shootin', I climb up here to see what it was all about. Blinky couldn't make the grade."

"You climbed up here when you knew the shootin' was over," Red said. "You ain't climbin' into danger no place."

"You got me wrong, Red. Honest, I thought mebbe I could lend yuh a hand."

"Well, get Blinky up here so I can look him over. I reckon he can make it if he tries hard enough."

Molliter stuck a crooked, dirty, little finger into his mouth and whistled. There was an answering whistle from below.

"He'll have to go around till he finds an easy climb, yuh know," Molliter said. "Count o' his game leg."

"I'll just take the gun from your waistband, fella," said Red.

"My good gosh, if you kep' a gun on me, Blinky couldn't do nothin'," Molliter declared.

"You expect Blinky would let me hold him up because I had you held up?" Red smiled. "Don't be silly, Molliter. I been with you for quite a few minutes. That oughta be long enough for anybody to size you up."

"You don't think much o' me, do yuh?" Molliter asked.

"Not a hell of a lot."

"Why?"

"Give me your gun," Red snapped.

"Want me to take it out?"

"Certainly! Think I'm afraid to let you have it in your hand when I got a gun pushed into your fat?"

"You got nerve, Red."

"I ain't provin' that now."

Molliter slowly drew the gun. He kept the tip of it pointed down, so that Red would not think he was going to use it. Humour danced in Red's eyes again. Gosh, this fella was terrible. He didn't know a thing.

"Just drop it," Red ordered.

Molliter let the gun fall on the rocky floor. The singing sound was still in the air when a man came around a bend in the rocky trail. He walked with a decided limp, and as the climb grew steeper he put down a hand and rested it on his knee as if to stiffen the knee. He was, Red thought, a better man than this lummox before Red.

When he was within fifteen feet of them, he stopped and looked at Red. He had been well nicknamed. He had some sort of nervous trouble with his eyes. He blinked both at the same time and then he blinked them separately. Red did not think there was anything wrong with his vision, however. Red had a sense of Blinky's seeing him clearly at first glance.

Blinky wore a gun and Red, now facing him with Molliter

at his side, believed he was entertaining a notion of going for the gun. He gave over the notion, however, and even folded his arms in place of raising his hands. His eyes went to the gun on the rock.

" He got you foul, did he, Molliter ? " Blinky asked, and his eyes flew shut and then opened with astonishing rapidity.

" Now, now, Blinky——" Molliter began.

Blinky went cold. Save for his eyes he became motionless. Red saw that he was as scornful of Molliter as Red himself could be. Probably he was scornful of everybody, due to his nervous affliction and his lameness.

" Has he got you foul, Molliter ? " Blinky said icily.

" Why, I ain't proved a thing up yet. He's on'y——"

" Has he got you foul ? "

Blinky thrust forward his head and stared at Molliter as if Molliter were his bitterest enemy instead of a man with whom he had been travelling.

" Yes !" Molliter almost shouted.

" Why don't you say so, then ? "

" I just did."

" You shore took your time."

Red believed it was time that he impressed himself on Blinky. The man was quarrelsome and critical. Red had to take that out of him.

" Drag your gun, Blinky, an' drop it on the rock," Red ordered, and he put his own gun on Blinky.

Blinky did not immediately comply. Red had thought he would transfer his gaze from Molliter to Red, but Blinky did not. He could not signal to Molliter with his eyes and he tried to do so with his lips. He twisted them to the left, which was away from Molliter and towards Red. Red knew that he was trying to tell Molliter to throw himself on Red, to bear down that slight figure with the superior weight.

" Don't stir, Molliter," Red said, and then he laughed at Blinky. " You don't really think Molliter would try to jump me, do you, Blinky ? " he asked. " Do what I tell you. Right now !"

On the last two words Red struck a higher note, and Blinky proved that he was nervous through his body. He started, almost jumped. Then he had a moment of vast anger. It drew the blood out of his face. Curiously that anger stilled his eyes, and he had a moment during which he stared at Red from between rigid lashes.

He laid a quick hand on the butt of his gun.

" Not so fast," Red warned. " Draw the gun slow an' easy, pointed down. If you try to bring it up, I'll plug you."

Blinky obeyed.

" This is Red," Molliter explained. " We're in luck. Don't have to hunt all over the country for him."

" How do you know he's Red ?" Blinky snarled.

" He's got the letter," Molliter said defensively and Red saw that because of his stupid belief that he had made no mistake he would not disclose to Blinky all that had passed between himself and Red. " He knows what's in it."

Blinky nodded. He was only, Red saw, a shade more intelligent than Molliter. His actions had doubtless been caused by a suspicion which took the place of real intelligence. He came up to the two men. His lids blinked rapidly again as he lowered his eyes to Red's gun.

" Just stay away from me, outa reach," Red said. " Don't get too close. I got both o' you on my hands now, y'know."

" What's he holdin' yuh up for ? " Blinky asked Molliter.

" Didn't Walters say he was a careful guy ? " Molliter demanded. " Didn't Walters say he might not trust us right off'n the reel ? Well, he's holdin' me—us, now—up till we prove ourselves."

" Seems like he oughta prove himself," Blinky declared. " We're takin' the biggest chances."

Red suddenly thrust his gun into its holster. He looked as if he had accepted the whole situation. He hoped that neither man would see that he was as safe with the gun stowed away as he would have been with it in his hand. He could draw it before either man could lay hand on him. He wanted these two to do whatever popped into their minds.,

" It's all right, Blinky," he said. " Y'know, I don't stand any too well here. When Molliter showed up, I was swappin' bullets with Brinnon. His horse ran away an' I took it up."

Blinky looked at the sleek sorrel mare and his eyes glowed. " My horse ain't in none too good shape," he said. " I'll take the mare."

" You get next choice," Red laughed. " The mare is mine. You can have the pinto if you want him."

Blinky looked at the pinto. Blinky was, Red saw, a good judge of horse flesh.

" That piece o' calico wouldn't fade none for a while at that," he said. " I'll just grab him off."

" He's a good horse," said Red. " I'll lend him to you. Let's get down outa here."

He took the mare and led her down the incline, keeping his eyes turned back, so that neither man should have a chance to take up his gun. Molliter followed with the pinto and Blinky limped after. They went around the bend in the rocks, passed the sheer wall, and came up on the other side. One horse, its head drooping, stood there.

" My horse is gone !" Blinky gasped.

" Who you s'pose took it ? " Red asked.

" Looka here, fella," Molliter said. " You're actin' kinda funny."

" In what way ? "

" Why, you traded bullets with a fella in that clump o' trees,

an' you ain't showed no int'rust as to whether you got him or not."

"Everything in its turn," Red said. "I'll get around to that matter in a few minutes."

"You oughta 'tend to it now. Why, that gunman might be hidin' in them trees still."

"That's right. We'll go back to them."

They walked to a spot from which they could see the trees. Molliter stood looking at the clump uneasily. Blinky looked also, but there was no telling whether his regard was uneasy or otherwise, because of his flying lashes.

"You go long an' hunt among the trees, Molliter," Red said.

"'Thout a gun ?" the astonished Molliter asked.

"Shore ! There ain't nobody hid there. I just come over here so you an' Blinky would be satisfied."

Blinky's brain moved faster than Molliter's. Molliter's astonishment, now mixed with fear, gripping him.

"Y'know what I think, fella ?" Blinky asked Red.

"Ain't got no idea."

"I think you wasn't havin' no gun battle with nobody. You catched sight of us an' you begun shootin' to make us b'l'eve you was one hell of a fella. You thought we'd carry a report back that was in your favour."

"If I was havin' no gun battle there ain't nobody among them trees, Blinky," said Red smoothly. "So you just go up there an' have a look."

"Not me !"

"No ?"

Red's voice was so low that it just carried to Blinky. Blinky turned and regarded the youngster. Red's gray eyes were very bright. Blinky recoiled a little against that brightness. He had seen that kind of light in the eyes of men about to kill. Blinky had sense enough not to take into account Red's youth as being a liability. Plenty of young men were killers. Just now, to Blinky, Red looked as if he was the kind which enjoyed killing. So Blinky became placatory. "You wouldn't send me into them trees 'thout a gun, would you ?" he asked. "You wouldn't wanta see me killed ?"

"You spoke your piece. You doubted me. I always let every man play out his string. If you had kept your mouth shut, you'd have been safe. I'd have done the job my own self. But, now, you go an' have a look. In a way it's your own idea."

"You're tough, Red," Molliter whined.

"I'm tough. What kind of a man did you expect to meet ?" He stood staring coldly at Blinky for a moment, and then he said in a brittle voice: "Move yourself, Blinky."

"Did anybody fire at you from among them trees ?"

"Yes !"

"Did he quit firin'?"

"Yeh. Oh, hell, I'll tell you. I stood right up an' become a target for him. He didn't take a shot at me. There ain't nobody there, 'less he's dead. Now, how much nerve you got, fella? What kind of a man am I hooked up with?"

Blinky moved slowly towards the trees. He moved rather spryly, his anxiety seemed to make him forget his lameness. When he came to the clump of trees, he stood staring at them, ten feet from them.

"That's the way to do it, Molliter," Red jeered. "Just stand there so if anybody is hid he can take a shot at him."

"He's silly," Molliter said.

"No, he ain't," Red mocked. "If anybody is among them trees, he has seen us. He would wait till Blinky went out of our view. Then he would nab him."

"You conterdict yourself, Red," Molliter sighed.

"No; I on'y contradict you. You ain't burdened with brains Molliter."

"That's what you think," Molliter suddenly flamed.

"An' you think you are burdened with 'em? Well, if they're a burden to you, it's tough."

Blinky disappeared among the trees. Molliter turned on Red. He said: "I'm kinda gettin' you. You're tryin' us out. You ain't gonna take us on till you're sure. Mebbe that's a good idea."

"I might kill both you an' Blinky," Red said.

CHAPTER III

Red Keeps Still

"Aw, you're just tryin' to scare me with that line o' talk," Molliter declared. "You wouldn't dast kill us, though you might pack us off."

"Watch them trees. If you hear anything that sounds like Blinky was in trouble, run up there."

Molliter was silent. He kept his eyes on the trees.

Red believed he understood what had happened. The sharpshooter who had hidden in the trees had run to the far edge of the clump, so that he could leave it without being observed by Red. He had led Blinky's horse away in the sound deadening sand and then had fled across the flat, while Red had kept his eyes on the trees, and Red had caught sight of him only in the distance.

"Blinky's safe outa the trees," Molliter suddenly breathed in relief. "There ain't nobody in there."

Red glanced carelessly at the trees and saw that Blinky had emerged from them. He seemed to be himself again, and his limp was apparent. When he reached the two other men, he

said: "Nobody's in there now. Somebody was there, though. I could see where he had stood. I found the marks o' your bullets on the tree trunks, Red." Blinky grinned rather sourly. "You was tryin' me, Red."

"That fella Brinnon stole your horse," Red said. "How did he do it? Wasn't you right here with your horse?"

"Here? No. Nor over yonder. Me an' Molliter was standin' at the foot of the slope all the while you was shootin' it out with that fella. We couldn't see the horses. It's a good thing I got that pinto. I ain't so much for walkin'."

"S'pose we ride over to them trees an' get outa the sun," Red said.

They got the horses and mounted, Molliter going up easily in spite of his fat, but Blinky, because of his game knee, dragging himself up. He was lying across the saddle, easing his bad leg over when the calico horse began to buck. Blinky flopped into the saddle in one quick movement, though it brought a grimace of pain to his face. He snapped the horse up and the animal immediately became still. He knew that his master was on his back.

"Can ride, that fella," Red thought, and he said aloud: "One man horse, Blinky. He's decided you're the man."

Blinky was vain of any successful physical effort. His thin face lighted up. He said in the easiest tone he had yet used: "Coupla hops. Wasn't nothin'."

Red had decided to play one man off against the other. He looked at Molliter. "You weigh a horse down, fella," he said. "Why don't you shed some o' that fat."

"He likes his food too well," Blinky sneered. "Me, I allus eat light."

"But drink heavy," said Molliter.

"You eat an' drink heavy," Blinky declared.

"Don't fool yourself none 'bout my ridin', Red," Molliter went on. "I'll travel any place even with you."

"I've seen heavy men that could ride," Red admitted.

He was eyeing Blinky obliquely, and he saw the light die out of that ruffian's face. Praise of his horsemanship lost its fine quality when Red bestowed similar praise on Molliter, though the latter praise was not so definite.

They rode over to the trees, dismounted, and went into the welcome shade. It was no more than shade.

"Well, spill it, Molliter," Red ordered then.

Blinky sat down at the base of a small tree. Red felt his eyes on him, and because he wanted to read Blinky's face if he could, he looked down at him quickly. Blinky was staring up at him. Whatever emotion was ruling Blinky was so strong that, again, he was able to control his lids. His lashes were wide apart and his eyes were cold and hard. He encountered Red's look steadily.

"Just a minute, just a minute," Blinky said harshly. "We

ain't puttin' all our cards on the table. What talk did you and Molliter have before Molliter whistled me up? I ain't leavin' myself outa nothin'. I'm a man that don't work in the dark."

"Whatcha think——" Molliter began, stopped.

Blinky had turned a malevolent look on him, and, as if to make up for lost time, his lids flew fast. Yes, he was a man who refused to work in the dark, Red told himself. And he was a man who clung to no friends. He probably knew plenty of men but not one of those could have depended upon him in an emergency. Red thought he had an acid mind.

Though Molliter had chopped off his sentence, Blinky told him: "Shut up, you! What's wrong with yuh is that you're too cussed friendly. Yuh think yuh can smile an' smile an' get by. You'll have somethin' put over on yuh. What talk did you two guys have before I come up? It's a fair question."

"It's a fair question, Blinky," said Red mildly, "but you don't get no answer 'less I say you can have it. Can't you get it through your head that I'm runnin' things an' that I'm a better man than you an' Molliter put together?"

"When you got a gun and I ain't," Blinky savagely retorted.

"I thought we was here on business," said Red, still mildly. "If we ain't . . . if you like to climb up an' get your gun, Blinky . . . Well, yes, I b'l'eve that'd be a good idea. I don't know as I need you. Me an' Molliter could get along better alone mebbe."

Blinky took that differently from the way Red had expected him to take it. He bent his head and looked up at Molliter.

"What you think about that, fella?" he asked.

"My gosh, we don't want no gunplay," Molliter hastily answered. "The three of us can get along fine as soon as we get things ironed out."

"You're still my friend, ain't yuh?" Blinky purred.

"O' course!"

"You'd line up with me against this fella?"

"There ain't gonna be no call for no such a line-up. We got work to do."

"Still, if it come to a show-down?" Blinky persisted.

"We was friends first."

Red did not want the thing to go too far. He broke in: "Cut it out, men. I just been testin' you. I gotta know where I stand, don't I? Here's for your question: Molliter called me Red. He——"

"Can I cut in from time to time?" Blinky demanded.

"Shore."

"Well, they's plenty men with red hair wherever cows is. Red hair an' cows seems to go together. Anybody'd call yuh Red the minute you lit any place. Don't mean nothin'."

"He had to tell me he was from Walters," Red went on.

" How the hell could he do anything else ? Anyhow, wasn't I shootin' it out with Brinnon ? I told Molliter I had Walters' letter. But, you look here, Blinky : I ain't strong on explainin'. I can hop my horse an' ride outa here. By thunder, I can go to Walters direct."

" Oh, I guess that ain't gonna be necessary," Blinky said quickly, and Red knew that he had played a trump card.

" Let's see Walters' letter."

" You poor fish ! " Red scoffed.

" Yuh ain't got no letter from Walters," Blinky declared.

" That letter had somethin' in it," Red snapped. " Now take you or Molliter. You'd have been carryin' that letter around in your shirt. Not me ! Fella, if I ever got a love letter I might wear it over my heart one night, but no longer; and I fall for endearin' words from a pretty girl as fast as the next man. Love letters is burnin' things, so I've heard. But they're cold alongside that letter from Walters."

Blinky suddenly grinned up at Red. The grin seemed to say that Blinky himself was pretty shrewd and that Red was no slouch.

" Yuh mighta said that you had the letter but it was some place else," he observed. " No man of sense would keep a letter like that one. Thing to do is to strew it on the flat in pieces smaller than the grains o' sand."

" Which I done," said Red, grinning back at Blinky. " On'y I put a match to it first."

" You shore are careful, Red," Molliter said.

" Yeh," said Blinky, letting his lids go to rest so that they covered his eyes. " An' what was in the letter ? "

Red had been expecting that question. He showed not the slightest interest in it. He walked a few steps away and sank down with his back to another tree, so that he faced Blinky. He idly plucked a blade of the dry grass which grew between the trees and put it into his mouth. Molliter, seeming somewhat mystified, also sat down.

" Ho, hum," Red breathed.

" Meanin' yuh don't answer that question ? " Blinky asked.

" What was in that letter is my business," Red declared. " All questions is outlawed from now on, far as I'm concerned. I can ride outa here—an' will ! "

" Walters had a notion that you was layin' down on the job," said Blinky. " That was one reason he sent us."

" Yeh," said Red. " A man that runs away from danger can get some funny notions in his head. " Walters can have all the notions he wants."

" Yeh, but——" Blinky started.

" I'm restin'," Red said softly. " You two better."

He leaned back against the tree trunk and half closed his eyes. He could see that Blinky was staring at him. Near

him Molliter was breathing heavily. As Red had suspected neither of these men could keep still for long. Molliter might endure stillness for a while but Blinky was too nervous. Ten minutes passed and then Molliter stirred.

" Red."

Red opened his eyes and turned his head so that those eyes made blank now, were upon the gross man.

" Keep your dirty mouth shut," Red said.

" But——"

Red came to his feet without using his hands. He sprang across to Molliter, drawing his gun as he did so. He stopped in front of Molliter and raised the gun barrel. Molliter threw up both hands protectively.

" Red, no ! " he wheezed. " I ain't got another word to say."

Moving his lips as if he cursed Molliter, Red went back to his place and sat down. Again he half closed his eyes and fixed them on Blinky. Blinky's lids were once more flying. He was excited, Red saw, but inevitably he would speak before long. He would permit himself to be threatened rather than sit in silence.

Red's idea was to make these two understand that he was the boss, that he would give them only such information as he wished from now on. When he was sure that they understood that, he would take up their business together again. At length he let his eyes close, but his sense of hearing was acute. The silence deepened. He knew that Molliter and Blinky were exchanging questioning glances as to whether an attack was possible. Evidently they decided it was not, for suddenly Molliter began to breathe heavily again. Red opened his eyes and turned to the man.

" Can't you breathe without makin' a noise like a steam engine ? " Red demanded.

" Cut it down, Molliter," Blinky said, and his voice was once more controlled. Taking courage from the fact that Red did not call him down for speaking, he continued: " Red, let's get down to cases."

Red rose lazily, lifted his arms, and yawned. Dropping the arms, he shook himself. Then he walked between the two seated men and went into the open. He spoke loudly enough to his horse to permit the men to hear him. He was assured at once that they did not want him to ride off. Their excitement was so great that they braved Red's displeasure and ran out to him.

" Aw, Red, you ain't quittin' us, are you ? " Molliter begged.

" Quittin' you ? " Red scorned. " Hell, I ain't never been hooked up to you. I never seen two such dumbbells. Why, Blinky even asks me to show him a letter that would have fixed me up if it had been found on me. You damn fool,

Blinky, s'pose Brinnon had [illegible] me an' had found that letter on me?" Red slowly shook his head. "Gosh, how stupid!"

"Let's talk this thing over," Blinky said.

"Aw, shut up! I can't get nowheres with you two."

He turned his head and pulled the reins along his horse's neck and tugged a little at a cinch. His face was away from the two men. There was a frown between his eyes. Red seemed to be thinking deeply. He finished his unnecessary tugging at the cinch, took off his hat, and wiped his forehead. The passage of his handkerchief over his face had the effect of clearing it. The frown was gone when he turned his head back to look at the two.

"Well, so long," he said.

"Aw, Red, wait," Molliter pleaded.

"Make it snappy. I been hangin' around here too long. Brinnon may come back—with some men."

"We better get outa here," Molliter said in alarm.

"We'll settle things here or not at all. First off, I'm short o' money."

Molliter and Blinky looked at each other speculatively. At last Blinky nodded, as if he were satisfied. "You answer the description in a gen'rul way," he said. "If what passed between you an' Molliter was all right, I reckon you're the man. You got Brinnon's horse anyhow. Tell him, Molliter."

"Walters sent the five thousand by us," Molliter said. "You get it soon's you plug Brinnon."

"I might take that five thousand an' blow," Red said.

"You can't! We ain't got it on us, but you've said a thing that convinces me all right. Walters said you might pull just such a stunt. He said we was to be careful of the money."

"I could make you tell where you had the money cashed," Red said.

"It's in a bank. They wouldn't give it to you. They won't give it to nobody but me."

He looked at the ground. He had, for a long while, an air of abstraction. At last he looked at Molliter. "I think you're lyin'," he said. "I don't b'l'eve you guys come from Walters at all."

Molliter, for answer to that, dug into his hip pocket and produced a soiled envelope. He handed it to Red. Red opened it. Inside was an undated, unsigned note which was headed:

Introducing Blinky Snaggs and Sam Molliter.

"Yuh know the writin', don't yuh?" Molliter demanded.

Red did not answer. He tore the note into minute bits and let those trickle through his fingers.

"One thing don't look good to me," he said at last. "Walters ain't the kind of a guy that would let you fellas ride

away from him with five thousand dollars of his money in your hands."

"Yuh know Walters, for a fact," Blinky said, and now he seemed as eager to convince Red as he himself seemed to be convinced about Red. "Well, I'll tell yuh: Walters sent the money by another guy. I give yuh our words yuh will get it. We'll lead yuh to it. Walters trusts this guy. We don't get nothin' till we reports back to Walters."

Red mounted his horse slowly and sat smiling down at the two. They regarded him in a kind of despair.

"Don't ride away an' leave us," Molliter whined. "If yuh do, we don't get nothin' outa all this an' Walters will be sore at us."

"Another fella, you say," said Red softly. "Who is this other fella an' what does he know?"

"We ain't never seen him," Blinky put in, "but he ain't no gunman. Hell, Red, he was just a messenger for Walters. I guess he was a easy kind of a fella that wouldn't even know enough to steal the money."

Red decided not to press the matter. He might go too far. However, he would, in one last attempt, seek to prove to these two that he was not to be trifled with.

"Let the money go," he said sharply. "But you can come up on the rock with me, Blinky, an' get your gun."

"Shore, Red. That's the way to talk. Now we know where we stand."

"Don't I get my gun, too?" Molliter asked.

"If you want it," Red answered.

There was something in his tone, and he was touched by such a kind of defiant gaiety, that both men stared again.

"Watcha mean by that, Red?" Blinky asked.

"I mean that when you an' me each has a gun, we'll just face each other up there," Red stated.

"But, my gosh, Red——"

"You yella pup!" Red exclaimed.

The two men now looked at each other in dull wonderment. They were now altogether on the defensive, incapable of anger or resentment, and, for a space, incapable of speech or action. Red sat looking down at them, that bright look once more in his gray eyes. The look was fairly genuine, too; for he despised these men as he could not recall ever having despised anyone before. Some day both would have to face him with guns in their hands.

At last the men looked up at him together. Molliter sighed: "We don't get you none at all. Ain't you gonna work with us, Red? It means a lot to us."

"Don't you think it means a lot to me?" Red asked.

"Shore it does, an' that's why we can't understand you makin' to ride off. Red we'll do anything you say."

"Well," said Red, "that sounds reasonable."

"Red, you been tryin' us?" Molliter exclaimed.

"Come on, Red, tell us when you'll make a move," Blinky added. "We better get outa here. This ain't no country for us to be hangin' around in."

"Why," said Red slowly, "I'll get this fella Brinnon tonight—tomorrow—tomorrow night—when I get around to it." He leaned down to the men, a sudden menace in his manner. "You fellas needn't think this will be a picnic for you either. When I tell you to do a thing, I want you to hop to it."

"We was sent here so you would know you'd get yore money," Molliter said. "We didn't have no orders to get in on no acshul killin'."

"You'll get in on whatever is doin'," Red asserted.

"We're givin' you all the help you need," Blinky stated. "I ain't yella. You're the first man that ever called me that, Red."

Molliter was looking at the ground. He seemed to be turning over in his mind what Red had said. Red looked directly into Blinky's eyes, nodded towards Molliter, and let an eyelid drop over a mirthful but hard eye.

Blinky suddenly grinned.

CHAPTER IV

Hints

"Well, we got to be careful," Red quickly brisk, said. "Molliter, you better go up on the rock and take a look around. The fellas in this country are hell on reading signs. If they come lookin' for me, they'd waltz right up here."

"Why, they wouldn't have to read no sign to know where you was," Molliter said. "Brinnon would tell them."

Red had to think fast to right the mistake he had made. To gain a moment, he stood smiling at Molliter as if Molliter had made the mistake. Then he turned the smile on Blinky, to inform Blinky that Molliter certainly was silly. Blinky smiled back. Anger rose in Molliter.

"Oh, I know I'm a damn fool!" he exploded. "You two are the wise guys here."

He didn't know it, but he made sure the relationship which Red had been trying to establish with Blinky. Blinky seemed to like secrecy. Molliter was looking at Red, but Red was still looking at Blinky. So Blinky had a chance to control his lids and then let one droop.

"Nobody says you're a damn fool, Molliter," he said soothingly. "On'y you didn't get Red's idea."

"I s'pose you done that," Molliter snapped.

"Oh, shore!"

"Well, what was the idea?"

By this time Red had thought the thing out. He was fast with his explanation. He said: "What you think Brinnon would do on his way back to his place to get men of his own, Molliter?"

"He'd ride like hell, I reckon."

"Naw. He'd stop at the first ranch he come to an' tell the cowman what had happened between him an' me. That cowman and a bunch o' punchers is prob'ly on the way here now."

"My gosh, let's get outa here, then! We're losin' time."

"You're losin' time," Red said complacently. "You better get up on them rocks an' take a look. Your gun and Blinky's is still up there, you know."

"Can I get the guns?" Molliter asked.

"Certainly! You and Blinky has got to be armed."

Molliter appeared eager to feel a gun in his hand again. He looked at his horse. "No." Red smiled. "You can just walk all the way up there. We don't want you sneakin' out on us."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"Get goin', Molliter," Blinky said. "You want us to be trapped!" Molliter hastened away. Then he swiftly returned. Fear of being trapped befuddled him.

"I don't know as it's such a good idea for us to be with you, Red," he said, "specially in the daytime. Nobody knows us yet. Wouldn't it be best for us to keep under cover?"

"You're stickin' with me," Red declared. "You'll be in from now till the show-down."

"Walters didn't say nothin'——"

"Walters is out of it," Red snapped. "Get up on the rock!"

Molliter's face hardened and a glow came into his eyes, but he definitely departed without further comment. When he was gone, Red turned to Blinky.

"Blinky," he said, "you don't look like a sucker."

"I get yuh," Blinky said. "Yuh mean there ain't no use in me dividin' up with that guy. It's a fact. I been gettin' tired of him lately. He's a bag o' wind."

"There's another of these rock upheavals about two miles from here," Red said. "Lava, they say, I dunno. Waste place. Very few people pass that way. You——"

"Why, that's the place where he was to have met you," Blinky said in astonishment. "You talk like me an' Molliter didn't know about it. Walters tol' us about it, o'course. He tol' you in his letter, didn't he? He must of."

Suspicion was rising in Blinky again, Red saw, and once more Red had to think fast. However, he had broken off on a "you" this time, and the "you" could be the start of any kind of sentence. So Red said blandly: "If you

wouldn't bust in on me, Blinky, I could finish what I start to say. Don't be like Molliter."

"'Scuse me," Blinky murmured, and he seemed to want to be less like Molliter than any man in the world.

"I was goin' to say," Red went on, "that you an' Molliter was goin' to meet me there. I was trying you out again. That's the last of that, Blinky. If you know where we was to meet, you shore do come from Walters."

"Yuh shore are fast, Red," Blinky said. "Well, you and me know where we stand now. Say, s'pose Molliter comes down here with a gun in each hand. He might sneak in on us. He hasn't heard the final proof that everything is all right. He's a suspicious fella. He might blow us up."

"With me with a gun in my holster? You think I ain't listenin'. I'm ashamed of you, Blinky."

"You'll stick a bullet into him if he tries anything?"

"One bullet?" Red drawled. "I'll empty my gun into him."

"I hope he tries to sneak in. We better talk soft."

Red's face suddenly flushed. He hoped, with Blinky, that Molliter would try to sneak in. He would be glad of an excuse to kill him. But these two men hopped from one mood to another so swiftly that he was afraid that Blinky would misunderstand the flush which Red could feel in his cheeks. Red bent and pinched the tight leather over an instep. The flush might easily have been caused by that. When he straightened up he was quite himself, and Blinky seemed to suspect nothing.

"S'pose we all go over there," Red said. "I've got to take a look around this afternoon. You an' Molliter will be alone. You could ride down and we'd meet some place else around dark."

It was a cold-blooded imputation that Blinky would murder his pal, but it did not seem to shock Blinky. When Red, rather vaguely, lifted his eyes to Blinky's face, Blinky was staring straight in front of him. His lids were going up and down with great rapidity.

"That's that," said Red softly. "We'll move when Molliter gets back—if Molliter's able to move."

Blinky smiled again. Red was entirely satisfied. Blinky was a natural killer. Molliter was a fat slob. Blinky was lined up, and Red had ceased to care whether Molliter was or not. "Hadn't I better whistle Molliter in?" Blinky asked, showing that a killer could be nervous. "Somebody may ride in here any minute."

"Molliter ain't had time. We'll give him a few more minutes. Don't worry about him, Blinky. I got a good pair of ears. He can't get near enough to us to fire 'thout me hearin' him."

Blinky lifted his head as if he, too, listened for the sound of Molliter's return. There was no such sound as yet.

"This here Walters trusted Molliter more'n he trusted me," Blinky said. "Molliter is mean an' that makes Walters think he's a good man. What is this all about?"

"He didn't tell you about old man Brinnon?"

"Is he an ol' guy?"

Red had to wonder whether Blinky was fishing or not. However, Red could only go on.

"Well, not so old. Seventy mebbe. And, say, he's bad, that old fella. You know, you could ride that calico horse all day on land that Brinnon owns or controls. You talk about a man havin' cows on a thousand hills. Why, old Brinnon has got 'em on a thousand square miles, more or less. He's been the big noise in this country for forty years, and it's gone to his head. This here Walters came in here from California. He's one of these here gentlemen cattlemen—or thinks he is. Hell, there ain't no such animal! A man has got to work with his own cows to do anything with them in this day and age. Course, if he *knows*, he can lay back and watch other men work, but Walters don't know."

"But he must have coin," Blinky offered. "Gosh, man, you oughta see the place he lives in. Palace!"

"I know he's got coin. And I expect he was ready to spend a big bunch of it. They say he had options on a lot of land here, and he was goin' to buy up every cow that had at least a well-behaved father and mother. If there was grandparents so much the better, and as for great-grand-parents—oh, boy! Walters would ride a mile to get hold of a cow like that. Breed 'em up! Breed up high! That was the song that Walters was singin'. Prob'ly read about it in a book. Why, you'd have thought he was goin' to get steers ready for the market in three months.

"This old Brinnon is a ridin' gent, I'm tellin' you. He gets around the country. He hears everything, sees everything. I don't expect Walters had been here five minutes before old Brinnon knew all about him. He at least heard the echo of Walters' song, and it made him sore. Gettin' sore is Brinnon's long suit. If you hang around here very long, you'll hear a roar across the flat. That'll be old Brinnon layin' down the law to somebody. Most everybody stands for it, too. He has got them buffaloed, mostly. Them that he hasn't got buffaloed gives in to him anyway. Y'see, he's kind of an institution.

"You can figger out how it was between Brinnon and Walters. Here comes Walters, a cussed dude in Brinnon's eyes, a-tellin' people all about cows. And here was Brinnon, a reg'lar old landmark that cows has been circling around since God knows when. If you was to ask Brinnon how to get cows ready for the market, he would say, 'Leave 'em

alone, you poor fool. Nobody but a crazy man will run a cow off'n her feet. A cow ain't no pet, neither.'

" Well, Brinnon and Walters meets up in the road. As I hear it, they sit lookin' at each other for a minute. Then Brinnon busts out laughin'. Walters gets red in the face. Brinnon rides him. Gosh he rides him hard, rakin' him at every jump. Walters tries to throw Brinnon, but Brinnon sticks like a burr underneath a saddle. What I mean is that Walters can't get a word in edgeways. So he rides off, leavin' old Brinnon laughin' at him."

Red rolled and lighted a cigarette and exhaled a lungful of smoke.

" Then," he went on, " Walters meets up with Brinnon's daughter."

" Hell," said Blinky disgustedly, " is there a woman in this thing ?"

" Girl !" Red said softly.

Blinky looked at him keenly. The light of understanding dawned in Blinky's eyes.

" I get yuh," he said. " You're stuck on her your ownself." Whatever development was to come from that had to wait. Red suddenly drew his gun. Blinky fell back, fearful that Red was going to use the gun on him. He seemed to realize that men like Red were touchy about their girls.

But Red only held the gun lightly in his hand. He did not even point it at the trees.

" Come on out, Molliter," he ordered.

" All right, Red ! All right ! I'm comin'."

There was a loud sound of his passing hastily among the trees, and he was rather breathless when he emerged. He held a gun in each hand, but he kept them down.

" Gimme my gun !" Blinky cried.

Molliter started to raise one of the guns as if to extend it, but Blinky would not trust him. He sprang and snatched the gun from the man's hand before it came up. Then he thrust the gun into Molliter's fat as Red had previously done. Red holstered his own gun.

" You can handle him, Blinky," he said.

Blinky gave him one quick glance, and an immense satisfaction came to Blinky. He pressed harder on the gun and ordered : " Drop that other gun, fella !"

" W-why, Blinky——"

" Drop it, I tell you !"

Molliter dropped the gun and Blinky laughed. Red saw that Blinky was right in his element now. He had held up a man who was his inferior. He had him where he wanted him. And Red was backing Blinky. What situation, Blinky's whole attitude seemed to say, could be sweeter for a man who liked to kill when he could do so safely ?

" Blinky——" Molliter tried again.

" Keep still! What was you doin' among them trees?"

" I just went round on the other side to have a last look across the flat."

" You took your look from *among* the trees, huh?"

" I didn't want nobody to see me if anybody showed up."

" That's fair enough, Blinky," Red said, for he did not want to witness a murder. " Let him go."

" Did you hear what me an' Red was talkin' about, Molliter?" Blinky demanded.

" Blinky, I didn't. I could just hear you talkin'."

Blinky, Red perceived, was shrewd in his own way. He had done what he had long wanted to do apparently—impress himself on the fat man, and now he didn't want to let Molliter become suspicious.

" All right, Molliter," he said. " Yuh can have your gun. I just wanted to make sure about you. Yuh had a gun in each hand, y'know. That mighta been one for me an' one for Red."

" Think I'd go up against Red?" Molliter asked.

" Oh, you'd be afraid to go up against Red but not against me?" Blinky furiously asked.

" Y'know I wouldn't go up against you, Blinky. My gosh, I don't see why you should go wild against me. I'm doin' everything I'm told."

Blinky controlled his fury.

" All right, Molliter. Must make sure yuh keep on doin' that."

Both men holstered their guns and Blinky, with a smirk of satisfaction, turned back to Red. If mildness can be terrible, then a terrible mildness sat upon the red-haired man. He plucked out his gun with a swift, backward movement of his hand and aimed the gun at Blinky.

" What was that last thing you said, fella?" Red asked.

Blinky had to think that out, to remember. His memory was never too long. He stared at Red's gun.

" Why" he stammered, " I dunno . . . Oh, yes. About that——"

" I'm shootin' it out with any man that so much as mentions that girl," Red said, very softly.

" You mentioned her——"

" I was tellin' you what was what. Did you hear what I said?"

Blinky licked his suddenly dry lips and his lids worked overtime. " I get yuh," he said. " I ain't sayin' another word. I don't wonder Walters picked yuh to take care of old Brinnon."

" Old Brinnon an' me has got a private account," Red stated. " We'll settle it. He runs me off his place, with the—with somebody lookin' on."

" Did she—that person laugh?" Blinky asked.

"None. It was when Brinnon run Walters off that that person laughed. Walters met up with that person in town, and he come crawlin' to Brinnon, tryin' to make friends. The person thought at first that—er—well, he—was doin' it. This here Brinnon is harsh, but he has got a head. He can string a man. He let Walters come five times. Then he run him into the road, sendin' bullets too close to Walters for Walters' comfort. That person was in the doorway laughin'. Oh, hell, I can't keep this up. Damn it, she had Walters' number better'n her dad did.

"I think this here Walters is the mistakenest man that ever come into this country. He tried to steal Brinnon's daughter away. He had been hirin' men right and left, and, as an inexperienced man will do, he got the riff-raff. The riff-raff all hates Brinnon. He ain't got no use for an idler. He has give a whole lot of 'em a ride.

"Thinking to catch the girl alone, Walters laid for her one night with this gang of his. Damn it, Blinky, he was goin' to ride off with her! Why, it was a mistake even if she had been unguarded. Walters might as well have tried to ride off with a tiger cat. She would have clawed him to pieces before she got done with him.

"But she wasn't unguarded. Y'see, old Brinnon has sort of rode into the life he's now livin' out of what you might call a hectic past. He was here when there was a saloon in every other building in town, and when a man gambled across the board like he knew what he was doin'. He was here when cows had the right to the pursoot of life, liberty, and happiness, when they was allowed to multiply year on year ondisturbed.

"The girl had a habit of ridin' out about sundown, and Walters must have heard about that. Well, they tell me that them sharp old eyes of Brinnon's never left the girl after he had run Walters off the place. When she started for a ride, Brinnon wasn't far away. He wasn't far away when Walters confronted the girl in the road.

"He come leapin' out on a big roan horse and he rained bullets all around Walters. Walters took off down the road while the gang he had hidden along the roadside went a little flatter on their stomachs, I'm thinkin'. That must have been a wild ride. They say Walters went through the town hell-bent with Brinnon about two jumps behind him.

"They never stopped till they come to the county line. Then, as a kind of good-bye, Brinnon put a bullet through Walters' arm. Walters went to the next county seat and got medical attention. They say he was considerable dragged out. Next day he kept on goin', and I expect he was vowing vengeance on Brinnon. That's the vengeance he's tryin' to get now."

In spite of the oppressive heat, Blinky shivered. He said: "That old man must be some guy to go up against."

"Well, terrible!"

"How come you and Walters to hook up?" Blinky asked.

"How! Hell, I was one of the outfit Walters picked up. He gimme good money. He wrote me an' I went over to the city to see him. He seen I hated Brinnon on my own hook, I reckon."

"He told Molliter you wasn't getting no action. He was wild, Molliter said. He was pacin' up and down the big room that him an' Molliter talked in."

"Oh, he's a teapot," Red sneered. "Brinnon is a steam engine. Diff'runce between men, y'know. Now that the money's in sight, we'll get action. I was goin' on, blind."

"That's on'y fair—about the money, Red," Molliter declared.

"Where will you lay for Brinnon?" Blinky asked.

"Where will *we* lay for him, y'mean," Red said, and again his voice was soft.

CHAPTER V

Fixed Enmity

Blinky and Molliter drew a little closer to each other, as such men will do when their peril seems to have become common to them. Blinky, Red had no doubt, still had it in his mind to dispose of Molliter, but he was shocked and scared by Red's announcement that both men were to be in on the Brinnon matter.

Molliter started his hand towards the butt of his gun. Red's gun flashed towards him.

"Yuh damn fool," Blinky said, and drew away from Molliter.

Molliter raised the hand to his face and rubbed it. Then he said: "What's the matter with you, Blinky. Can't a fella scratch his face?"

Now Red smiled openly at Blinky, and Molliter shifted nervously on his feet and stared from one man to the other. Blinky seemed to feel that Red was fooling, and he winked at Red after he had controlled his lids again. Molliter caught that wink.

"You two fellas is tryin' to have some fun with me," he declared. "I don't like it. If we're gonna work together we shouldn't poke fun at each other."

"Aw, Red was just tryin' you out," Blinky said.

"You two is goin' to be in on it," Red said, but his tone was such as to convince Blinky that he was indeed fooling.

"When you start somethin', you never know where it'll end."

"All we was to do was to come here an' find you an' see that you got yore money," Molliter stated. "We wasn't to be in on no killin'."

"Don't be soft, Molliter," Red said. "Blinky ain't. Blinky has killed his man in his time, I'll bet."

"Yeh, but he ain't gettin' paid for no killin' now. We ain't gettin' much."

"Didn't I tell you I had a private account with old Brinnon? Ain't I goin to get five thousand ?"

"Yuh mean you'd divide ?"

"I ain't stingy."

"Well," Molliter said, "that puts things in a diff'runt light, don't it Blinky ?"

"Shore."

Red had been looking at Molliter, but he felt Blinky's eyes on him, so he turned to Blinky.

"You mean you'd divvy, Red ?" Blinky asked.

"I'll tell you somethin', Blinky." Red's tone was savage, but that, unknown to Blinky, rose from Red's disgust with these two. "I don't give a damn if I never see a cent of that five thousand."

"Boy !" Blinky breathed.

Red understood what was in Blinky's mind. Molliter must never see a cent of the five thousand either. Blinky would dispose of Molliter, take what Walters had paid Molliter, and then, by doing exactly what Red said, get the five thousand. It was a pretty plan—for Blinky.

"Well, let's get down to cases," Red said. "You see anybody from the top of the rocks, Molliter ?"

"Not a soul. The hull flat was empty."

"You took a good look ?"

"Shore did, though it was hotter'n hell up on that rock."

"Let's see," Red said, "what time was I to meet you ?"

"Didn't Walters tell you in his letter ?" Molliter asked, with a sudden stare.

"Honest, Blinky, I wonder you work with this fella," Red snapped. "He's dumb. He thinks I can get a letter and remember everything in it. I don't be'l'eve Walters set no exact hour."

"He didn't," Blinky said, with a strangely triumphant air. "I *know* you got that letter, Red, because you just hit the nail right on the head. Walters didn't fix no hour. He said we was to meet at nightfall."

"Why, shore ! Gosh, I'm dumb. Seems like a man would remember that."

"A fella forgets part o' things all the time," said the now fawning Blinky.

"Yeh, he does. Well, we'll be movin' over there. It's nearly two o'clock. Come on."

" What's the use o' movin' over there in this heat ?"

" Because it's a good place to hole up. You wanta be here when old Brinnon comes back ? I guess he was too proud to send anybody ahead of him. He's ridin' to get his own men. He don't ride as easy as he used to do, o' course. We got plenty time."

" How's that for figgerin', Molliter ?" Blinky demanded.

" Pretty damn good. Blinky, you're satisfied with everything, are you ?"

" Cer'nly ! My Gawd, did you ever meet up with a more generous fella than Red ?"

" Why, no, if he does divvy with us."

" I wonder what man here doubts my word ?" Red asked.

He knew he would have to be patient now. He had to turn these men definitely against each other. He was sick of them but he would have to endure their company a while longer. He still had Molliter to work on.

" I don't want to meet Brinnon an' his men," Molliter said. " Let's go."

Red turned so that he could glance at Blinky without Molliter's seeing his face. He screwed up that face as Blinky looked at him.

" Blinky," Red said, " would you mind goin' up on the rock an' takin' one last look. I see you got some trouble with your eyes but you ain't got none with your sight. Don't think I ain't been studying you."

Blinky was tickled when anyone praised him for anything physical. He had suffered a great deal of derision on account of his infirmities. Men were actually cruel to him in their speech. What Red had said broke through his piled-up stubbornness. He was especially pleased because Red had asked him to make that climb. Red seemed to think he was as good a man as any in spite of his lameness.

So Blinky did not argue that there was no necessity for taking another look. Red had observed that he had been staring at Molliter before Red had spoken. Already he seemed to be casting about in his mind as to just what he should do to his companion and where he would act against him.

That made him more complacent than he would otherwise have been. He departed, hobbling, for the incline up to the top of the rocks.

This gave Red his chance with the gross Molliter. Red would have liked to knock the man's head off and leave him lying there, but that would have done him no good in the end. He had to play out the play.

" How you feelin', Molliter ?" Red asked.

" Hot."

Red laughed and was silent for a moment. Molliter looked at him in that dull astonishment which sometimes came to him. He asked : " What's the joke, Red ?"

" No joke. Hell, don't you s'pose I know you're hot ?"

" Yuh asked me how was I feelin'."

" I mean in your mind, fool."

" Have I got plenty to worry about, Red ?"

" Wait a minute," Red said.

He rose and walked through the trees. He stood at the far side of them for some minutes, looking over the flat. He expected no riders out there. Especially he did not expect old Brinnon. He wanted Molliter to stew for a while. Presently he returned to the man.

" Red," said Molliter, " I ain't never met up with a man like you before. Damn it, you seem to hop in all directions at the same time. I can't never put a finger on yuh."

" Why should you want to put a finger on me ?"

" Well, yuh just hinted at somethin'. Tell me what it is, Red. Wise me up. You got a good head on your shoulders."

" Molliter, I'm goin' to tell you somethin'. Don't fly off the handle, will you ?"

" You'll be tellin' me for my own good," Molliter said. " I won't fly off the handle."

" Keep your head. Don't let your sidekicker suspect nothin'. He tells me he's layin' for you. He's goin' to take all the money in sight."

Molliter's face went black. He immediately began to seek to find grounds for suspicion of Blinky, Red saw. Naturally suspicious, he was set by Red's statement, to wondering whether Blinky had ever been a real pal.

" I been watchin' that guy," he presently declared. " I don't fly off the handle. I'll watch him a little closer. He better not start anything with me."

" I got an idea that he suspects both you an' me," Red said. " Be awful still for a while. I believe Blinky will come through the trees like you done. I think you gave him an idea."

" I've give him plenty ideas," Molliter declared.

The two men were standing there in the heat at the time Blinky should have returned.

There was a sound among the trees.

Red was not surprised. It had been easy to forecast that Blinky would take this cautious step. He would want to discover whether Red and Molliter would be talking about him.

Red looked at Molliter just as Molliter looked at him. Again Red screwed up his face and Molliter slightly nodded.

" An' I'll tell you somethin' more fella," Red said, loudly enough for his voice to carry. " Course, you're all right, but that there Blinky has got a head on his shoulders. You're lucky to have him for a pal. You stick to him an' he'll take you some place."

" Don't I know it ?" Molliter asked.

They were silent then. There was another little sound among the trees. It died out. Molliter leaned to whisper. Red shook his head vigorously and Molliter leaned back.

After a while Blinky came along from the direction from which he should have come. He tried to appear calm, but Red could see that a fierce satisfaction was running through him.

"Nobody in sight," he said.

"You got back quick, Blinky," said Red.

"I can make time," Blinky boasted.

"Let's ride," Red suggested.

As they mounted, Blinky gave Red an understanding smile.

"Oh, yeh, you sucker?" Red said to himself. "Well, you'll find out."

CHAPTER VI

Lopin' In

Red was loping along a winding trail which led to water. He was riding smartly, for he had several things to do before nightfall. He and the two men had gone to the lava beds. They met no one, and Red had left the two there.

He had watched the men on the way and had seen that the seeds of suspicion which he had sowed in their minds were sprouting more rapidly than he had expected. The men kept narrowed eyes on each other, that suspicion enabling Blinky to control his lids. They exchanged no words. Their faces were set and their lips were grim.

Red had managed to get in a few words with each. He knew that murder might easily result from this situation. These two were due to die, and he did not care which killed which. Each might kill the other in an exchange of shots. Red had seen that happen before, a dying man even raising himself on an elbow to finish his opponent.

A word, a look, might precipitate deadly action between the two.

Red had come to the conclusion that he had better prevent a slaying for a few hours at least. He had a good reason for that.

"I'll be leavin' as soon as we get over there," he had told Blinky. "Don't start anything with Molliter till I get back."

"He better mind his business," Blinky said.

"You hear what I'm tellin' you?" Red asked sharply. "You've got to stay there till nightfall. You want somebody to come along and find you with Molliter—like he will be?"

"Well, that's right," Blinky agreed uneasily. "I never thought of that."

"You better do some thinkin'."

"I'll lay off him till you get back."

Red got that across to Molliter too, later on, and exacted the same promise from him.

When he left them, they were watchful of each other, but he thought they would start nothing till he returned.

Now, when he came to the water, he drank a little and let his horse drink a small amount. Then he loped on again. His way for some distance lay across a sagebrush flat, but presently there was a growth of small timber with grass growing away from it. Cattle were all across the grass, in groups. They were Brinnon's white-faces.

Red drew down his horse and jogged slowly among the cows. They lifted their heads to look at him and then went on eating.

He came presently to a row of hills and passed through them. Another row confronted him, squat hills of sand, and he sent his horse up one of these and stopped it. Brinnon's ranch outfit lay below him. There were an old weather-beaten house which had been Brinnon's home all his life, a long bunk-house, other outbuildings and a number of corrals. Except for white smoke issuing from the chimney of the house, there was no sign of life about the place.

Red descended and rode across the intervening flat, around the corrals, and up to the house. A girl immediately came to the door. She gave an instant impression of alertness. There was an effect of slenderness about her, in spite of the loose apron she wore. Her hair was a very dark brown and her eyes almost black, big and clear and giving evidence of an abounding vitality.

She showed no surprise at seeing Red. She smiled swiftly, and her dark eyes softened. The smile brought dimples into her cheeks. Those dimples had always fascinated Red.

"Is your sweet-tempered father about?" Red asked, after he had dismounted and had come up to the door.

"He rode over to the Carstairs an hour or more ago," she answered. "He ought to be back any minute. Come in."

"Think it'd be safe to cross the threshold of your father's house?" he inquired.

"Mercy me, don't you talk grand?" she said. "Well, brave men take chances."

They laughed, and he followed her into the kitchen. Beyond the door she turned to him and stood eyeing him.

"Now, you quit lookin' at me like that," he said. "I'm tryin' to be good and you won't let me."

Another laugh escaped her lips, a low laugh this time. She went up to him swiftly and put her arms about his neck. He stooped and kissed her, his face grave.

" It seems a long time till fall," he said.

" Very long," she agreed.

She went about what she had been doing at the table in the middle of the room, and Red fastened his eyes on her. He told her nothing of what his errand with her father was and she did not ask. They talked of this and that till Brinnon rode into the yard.

When he heard Brinnon nearing the door, Red moved his chair up against the wall. He sat erect in it as Brinnon came into the room. At sight of him Brinnon stopped. Brinnon did not look the age which Red had said was his. He might easily have been taken to be a good sixty years old but no more, and his blood still ran warm. He was capable of swift anger. Now that anger was touched with malice.

" Well," he snapped, " you must have picked up a bunch of nerve that a good man dropped. What're you doin' in my kitchen ? "

Red looked at him. He had plenty of news for him, and he was sure that he could bend him to his will. So Red took his time ; his eyes, merely cool, betrayed nothing of what was in his mind.

Brinnon was a big man, even though somewhat bowed legs robbed him of the effect of his full height. His face was lined and seamed and darkened by sun and wind, but there was a good colour in it. His eyes, like his daughter's in colour, were very bright. Brinnon did not yet need glasses, even to read with.

" Why, I'm sittin' here, waitin' for you," Red said.

" Who gave you permission to wait for me ?" Brinnon demanded.

Red got to his feet. He faced Brinnon coolly. He said, with a grin he couldn't repress : " Only a coward would shoot at a man from timber like you done to me."

There was a chair in front of Brinnon, and he stepped over to it and sank into it. His astonishment was so great that he could only stare at Red, his mouth open a little way. He did not know it, but he had, of late years, come to depend upon his daughter a great deal. Presently he looked at her.

" What is this fool drivin' at ?" he asked her.

" I'm sure I don't know, Father. He's told you as much as he has told me."

Brinnon's anger reasserted itself. He went back to Red. He found Red smiling. The smile seemed to increase Brinnon's anger. He got to his feet and went to the opposite wall and leaned back against it.

" If I were you, I'd take it easy, Father," the girl said.

" I'm takin' it easy. Fella, whatcha drivin' at ? You got some information, but you ain't man enough to come right out with it. You got to string me along. What is this

about me shootin' at you? It's a lie, o' course. If I'd shot at you, it wouldn't have been from no timber. It woulda been in the open, an' you wouldn't be here to throw out hints."

"Well, I told a coupla men you had shot at me and that I had shot at you. Was I a liăr?"

"You shore was!"

"Does it occur to you, Father, that he might have had a reason for his story?" the girl asked.

"If he had a reason, it wouldn't be a good reason," said Brinnon.

Red got to his feet. He faced Brinnon coolly.

"You been ridin' me kinda hard, Brinnon," he said acidly, "but you might as well get it out of your head that I'm afraid of you. I've only been aimin' to keep the peace. You're in a fix and I've come to tell you about it."

"If I'm in a fix, I can get out of it without help from you or anybody else," Brinnon asserted.

"Oh, yes, you could stand an army on its head. You——"

Brinnon snapped open the door behind him. Holding it open with his foot, he faced Red. "Get out of here," he yelled.

"You needn't roar, Father," said the girl. "He isn't deaf."

Brinnon turned on her and stared at her. "Have you been foolin' around with this fella after I ordered him to keep away from here?" he asked.

"Has it ever occurred to you that I might have some business that wasn't your business?" she asked.

"Well——" Brinnon began.

"I'm of age," she broke in. "I own my horse, its saddle and bridle, my clothing. I would need no more to leave here."

"Why——"

She wouldn't let her father go on, but snapped: "Don't act so much like a bear, Father."

"Walters has sent a coupla thugs down here to shoot you full of holes," Red told him.

That was not the exact truth, for Blinky and Molliter had not been sent to do any shooting. The shooting part of it was exact, however.

Brinnon wheeled back to Red. Hard mirth glimmered in his eyes and quivered on his lips. "That fella!" he cried. "Why, I drove him——"

"I know you drove him out of the county," Red said. "I heard all about it. But I suppose you could be shot, couldn't you? A bullet *could* be sent into your body. It'd go into you, same as into any other man, wouldn't it?"

"I——"

The girl left the table and went over and stood beside her

father. He broke off his sentence on the one word, but he was so angry now that he seemed to think he had been interrupted by words from one of the others.

"Do I get a chance to finish one sentence?" he demanded.

"Be sensible, Father," she said. "Henry wouldn't be telling you this if it weren't true."

Brinnon caught swiftly at her use of Red's first name. "Henry?" he said and now his voice was curiously low. "What do you mean—'Henry'?"

The girl took a quick, sharp breath, but she lifted her head proudly. She said: "I've been waiting for something like this Father, you underestimate every man you meet. You scarcely knew Walters, yet you treated him like a dog. Why, that man is as proud in his own way as you are in yours. Only he wouldn't use your direct methods in meeting situations. Can't you understand that he has hired someone to kill you? You degraded him. Do you suppose he wouldn't do something about that? If you had studied him a little, you'd have known that he'd do just what Red says he's done. No meaner man lives, no more selfish man."

"After what Walters tried to do to you, you're defendin' him," Brinnon sneered.

With a little sigh because her father could sometimes be so obtuse, intentionally or otherwise, the girl returned to her former place. Brinnon took it with up Red again.

"Do you think I'm afraid of a couple of thugs whose guns are for hire?" he inquired.

"It ain't a question of what you're afraid of," Red stated. "You ride abroad, don't you? You haven't got eyes in the back of your head, have you? A hidden man could shoot you. Have some sense, Brinnon!"

"Yeh, I'll have a little sense," said Brinnon. "I'll have sense enough to ask you what lies between you an' my daughter."

"Come fall, I'm going to marry him, Father."

"How many times have I tol' you, you couldn't mix with no damned cowpuncher?" Brinnon asked.

"Henry isn't a cowpuncher. He has his own ranch."

"Ranch! A thousand acres an' a few starved cows. I don't call that——"

"It's good enough for me, Father."

Brinnon's face purpled. It was the general report that he considered his daughter too good for anybody, even for Walters, a man of wealth. A few of the more discerning ones said he was merely selfish, that he wanted to keep his daughter with him to cheer his oncoming age.

Now he raised his heavy fist as if he were about to crash it down into his other palm and deliver an ultimatum following the blow.

"That's a matter that can be discussed later," Red said.

"We better get to the present business now. I haven't got all the time there's goin' to be."

"Yeh, we'll settle this other matter later," Brinnon said, with a sudden change, and letting his fist open and the hand fall. "Where are your two gunmen ?"

"There will be three by nightfall," Red explained. "Red Considine will be the third. Them two other fellas mistook me for Considine, account of my red hair. They were lookin' for Considine. I had had a run-in with him. He blazed away at me while I was amblin'. I could have got him but I let him go."

"That's the way with this generation," Brinnon sneered. "A man can try to shoot you up an' you let him go."

"Considine wanted to marry me, too," the girl said. "It's funny how every man around here wants to marry me."

"There ain't nothin' funny about that," Brinnon declared. "You're *my* daughter for one thing. So Considine wanted to marry you. That snake !"

"For once I agree with you in your estimate of a man," she smiled. "Considine saw Henry and me together."

"So he went gunnin' for your Henry ? Uh huh ! Well, I'll take care of your Mr. Considine."

"You can't kill him for asking me to marry him," she pointed out.

"I can kill him for bein' what he is, gen'ally," Brinnon said.

"And a jury would set you free ? You're being silly, Father."

"I ran into those two gunmen just after I mixed with Considine," Red said. "I told them I had been shootin' it out with you. They thought I was Considine and they finally walked into my little trap."

"Where are they now ?" Brinnon asked.

"Considine meets them at nightfall."

"They're prob'ly stringin' you. You don't look no more like Considine than I do."

"Oh, yes, I do. We're the same build, and we both have red hair."

"Considine's hair isn't red, as yours is red," the girl said.

"No !" Brinnon jeered. "Hennery has beautiful hair."

"These fellas don't know an awful lot," Red went on patiently. "They were on their way to meet Considine. I got an idea they are kinda nervous. When they found a man with red hair indulgin' in a little gunplay, they thought he must be Considine. They're in a new country on a dangerous errand, and they wanted to finish the errand as quick as they could."

"Well, tell me about it," Brinnon ordered.

Red told the story in detail as he had known he would have to do. As he talked he kept his eyes on the kitchen clock. Only one thing he omitted : that was where the two men were

now. Brinnon asked tardily to be acquainted with that important fact.

"Just a minute," said Red. "Brinnon, you've stepped mighty wide around this country. I ain't sayin' nothin' about the handsome part of it. It's true that I'm goin' to marry Sue, come fall. Nothin' can stop that. We've made up our minds. Now, just a minute more. That's my last word on that subject.

"Your life is in danger. Considine will kill you if he can. He may do it before tomorrow mornin'. You know what that fella is. You know he only escaped by the skin of his teeth when he murdered Joyce that night over by the railroad. If he hadn't covered himself so well, they'd have got him then. You know he's a drunkard and a bum. He'll do anything for money, and Walters is willin' to pay him well. I guess that's what has stopped Considine so far. He's been waitin' for the money."

"It don't seem possible that Walters would hire a man to murder another man," Brinnon said in a calmer tone.

"How would you feel if you had been driven mile on mile with a man like yourself behind you?" Red asked.

"The man that could drive me like I drove Walters don't live."

"You can imagine it, can't you?"

"Well, I'd feel pretty tough."

"I reckon so! You'd be mad enough to kill, your own self."

"I wouldn't hire a gun."

'Walters had to. He ain't got no nerve himself. He was bluffin' his way through down here. Now, then, you want to get in on this thing, don't you?"

"Get in on it?" Brinnon asked. "Why I'm gonna handle it! Just tell me where them fellas an' Considine are gonna meet up. I'll set a man-trap for 'em!"

"You won't do anything of the kind," Red declared. "You can come in on it if you want to, but you'll come in behind me. I'm goin' to be the boss. You're goin' to do what I say."

"You're gonna make me let you save my life?" Brinnon boomed. "You're gonna lay that debt on me?"

"Exactly!"

Brinnon again sank into a chair. He looked out through the open door for a long time.

"All right!" he said. "Hop to it!"

But he did not look at Red. Red glanced around at the girl. She shook her head gravely.

"It won't work, Mr. Brinnon," Red said.

Brinnon came nimbly to his feet and faced Red furiously. "What won't work?" he thundered. "If I give you my word, ain't it good?"

" It is, and that's the point. You haven't given your word."

" You're tryin' to put me under obligations to you, so I can't object to your marryin' Sue."

" That's it. I thought it all out on the way over here. There's nothin' like peace in families. You're goin' to see your daughter an' me married. If you're game, you'll give us your blessin'."

" Not in a million years !"

CHAPTER VII

" DAMN !"

RED was silent, as he had been silent with Blinky and Molliter. Brinnon was still a good man in many ways, but he was too energetic to endure silence when something like this was brewing. He wanted to dash madly and get over whatever there might be. As Red sat there, creasing his hat and pushing out the crease, and his daughter toyed with the fringe of the table-cloth, Brinnon began to fidget in his seat.

At last he got up and went to the door and stood looking out. There was nothing outside to interest him. In fact just now a catastrophe would have been necessary to take his mind off what Red was withholding. He went back to his seat.

" Go on", he told Red.

" About what ?"

" About the hull cussed business."

" Oh, I aim to pull this thing off myself. Lemme tell you, Brinnon : You're highly respected all through this country, no man more ; but the people that has got a real likin' for you ain't so many. You know how tongues will run on. People will have a good deal to say about Brinnon when it gets out that poor Red Starling went out an' got the men that were layin' for Brinnon, while Brinnon was safe at home."

" How long has this thing between you an' Sue been goin' on ?" Brinnon asked.

" Year or more."

" Behind my back ?"

" Behind your back."

" You ain't got no shame, either of you," Brinnon asserted.

" Not a bit !"

" Well, people have talked about me before this."

" They've never said you were a coward."

" They won't know. You ain't no tattle-tale that I ever heard."

" Why I'll have to go to the county seat an' turn in a report. I'll have to give all the details. I'll have to say that you were at home after I tol' you what was goin' on."

" I'll say you lied, that you tied me up."

" Well, y'know explanations are worth about a cent a ton in this man's country," Red said. " Mebbe *you* could explain at that."

" Explain. I never explain nothin'."

" If you keep still people will talk all the more. I won't be able to deny that I told you about this thing before it was pulled off."

" S'posin' I was to let you marry Sue—give you my hand on it—would you stay up here an' let me land them fellas ?"

" Nope. I don't need anybody to let me marry Sue. She's of age."

" You can go to hell !" Brinnon said.

" That's all right, but you're usin' coarse language in front of my girl."

" Your girl !"

Brinnon choked so, that he was unable to continue. He left the room, breathing hard.

" I guess he's called my bluff, Sue," Red smiled.

" You'll have to go on, Red," she returned. " It would be terrible if we were married without his consent. I wouldn't be happy."

" I know," Red nodded.

Sue went to the door and looked quickly outside. She went back to Red and put down a hand and he took it. She said : "He's not in sight. I think he went into the bunk house. There are several men in there who've been riding night herd. I think he'll get them up and have them bring horses for him and them."

" I oughta have a fresh horse," Red said, " but I don't suppose he'll let me have one."

Sue stood deep in thought. Red felt a shiver go through her. " What is it ?" he asked.

" Wait !" she said.

They had to wait no more than five minutes. Then Brinnon returned. He was trying to look unconcerned, but Red found a glow in his eyes and heightened colour in his cheeks. He was blunt and a poor actor. As he sat down, he yawned. Then he fixed his eyes on the floor as if he were able to keep them there through all eternity. Red saw, however, that he had so seated himself that one ear was towards the door. He was listening.

Sue took her hand from Red's and resumed her seat.

" Mr. Brinnon," Red said, " will you lend me a fresh horse. My mare is tired."

" Oh, shore !" Brinnon said, too agreeably.

" Father, what have you up your sleeve ? " Sue asked.

" Me ? Why——"

" Don't lie, Father !"

" Why, Sue, you callin' your own father a liar ? "

"Tell the truth, then."

Brinnon was silent and Red started for the door.

"Where you goin'?" Brinnon demanded.

"To get a horse and put mine in a corral."

"Not yet you ain't."

"Why not?"

"Because you're in my house, an' while you are, you do what I say."

"It's no longer my house, Father, my home?" Sue asked.

"You're bein' silly now."

"I can wait, honey," Red said.

At the word of endearment Brinnon's lips twisted. He sat in silence till through the open door, the three inside saw four men ride into view.

"Your night herders is startin' early," Red said.

"They ain't gonna do no night herdin', not on cows at least. They're ridin' with you an' me."

Red began to whistle softly, and Brinnon said: "You can go get that horse, Hennery."

"I don't want no horse. I'm ridin' for home. I can get a fresh horse there."

"We'll follow you. There's a horse for me behind them riders."

Red continued to whistle, and now Brinnon snapped at him: "Time is passin'. Get goin', fella."

"Father," Sue put in, "will you tell one of the boys to get my horse, too."

"*Your* horse?"

"Yes; I'm riding with Red."

"Leavin' *me*?"

"Of course!"

"I don't b'l'eve you."

"She won't need to leave you, Brinnon," Red said. "I'm goin' to sit right here till the sun sets. Then it'll be too late to do anything."

"Them boys is wearin' guns. I'll have one o' them come in an' put a gun on you."

Red and Sue laughed.

"It's no good, Father," Sue said. "Red has got you. You wouldn't even have him stuck while I was looking on."

"I could make you go to your room."

"How? Drag me there?"

"How many men you figgerin' will be needed to catch them fellas, Starling?" Brinnon demanded.

"Two. You an' me—if I was the boss."

"I could get in if it come to a scrap?"

"Oh, I guess so."

"W-e-l-l, you can be the boss."

"Your hand on it, Mr. Brinnon."

Brinnon walked over to Red and put out a slow hand,

and Red took it. Brinnon snatched the hand away at Red's first pressure.

"You're holdin' me up," he declared.

"Better get aboard your horse," Red advised. "I'll be out in a minute. Tell the boys to turn in their horses but to stay around the house."

Brinnon started towards the door. On the threshold he turned. Apparently he didn't want to leave Red alone with Sue again. But Red had crossed the room on quick, easy feet. He had an arm about Sue's waist, and as Brinnon looked on, he kissed her—and she kissed him.

"Damn!" Brinnon exploded, and flung himself out of the door.

CHAPTER VIII

His Own Medicine

Red and Brinnon were riding back over the trail towards the lava bed. Brinnon had waited outside the house for Red, and when Red had come out, the older man had fixed him with a malevolent glare.

Looks couldn't kill Red Starling, however, and he grinned. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Brinnon's face grow crimson. Brinnon said nothing till they were well out on the trail. Then he twisted his head about and looked at Red.

"You think you're a foxy young man, don't you?" he asked heavily.

"Me? Why, no. I ain't got no fox in me, Mebbe I'm animal, some, but not fox."

"You been sly about courtin' Sue."

"On Sue's account," Red said. "She asked me to. She said she didn't want any trouble with you. She said you were gettin' old and she was all you had."

"Old?" Brinnon snorted. "If you're as good as I am when you have my years on your shoulders, you'll do a whole lot better'n I think you will. I'm as good as I was at fifty. I'm as good a man as you are right this minute."

"I know you're well preserved. Everybody knows that. But are you only as good as I am? If so, you think a heap better of me than I believed you did."

"I don't," Brinnon said angrily, "an' I tell you right now that you ain't gonna marry my girl."

"Why not?"

"I ain't gonna have her starve to death on no sagebrush ranch."

"She won't starve. It'd take us years to eat all the beef I own."

Brinnon veered his horse over close to Red's. His eyes glowed with an anger which would have done credit to a younger man if there can be credit in uncontrolled anger.

"We got a job on our hands, Starling," he said. "When two men have got a job on their hands, they got to work together."

"We're ridin' together," Red pointed out. "That's the start of the job."

"I mean, they can't let anything come between 'em. All right! I'll work with you. You've made me let you be boss. But I say to you that when we come in from this hunt, you an' me part company. If you don't leave Sue alone, I'll run you into the next county like I done Walters."

Red stopped his horse and Brinnon followed suit. They eased themselves in their saddles and swung around a bit, so that they could look into each other's eyes.

"I'd have married Sue long before this," Red declared, "only she said she wanted to wait for fall. She thought mebbe after the fall round-up you might be feelin' good, and would see things in a new light. As for you runnin' me into the next county, there won't be any next county when you tackle that job. If you got any notion that I'm afraid of you, Brinnon, get it out of your head."

"You're sayin' that because you *do* think I'm old," Brinnon snarled.

"Oh, I guess I'm shootin' off my mouth," said Red, a little wearily. "I can only say that you're one hell of a man to work with."

Brinnon stared. He hadn't been stood up like this in a long time. He looked at Red as if he were seeing him for the first time. But there was no sign of relenting in him. The stubbornness which his long years of authority had bred in him was not to be shaken by another.

"We quit as soon as we bag these three fellas," he declared.

"I'm still the boss, Brinnon," Red said softly.

"Yeh, an' you're settin' your horse here, doin' nothin'," said Brinnon.

"Doin' nothin', eh? Well, here's an order for you. Get to hell out of here. Go on back home. The boss is talkin' to you."

Brinnon drew his gun and pointed it at Red's stomach. Red looked straight into Brinnon's eyes, and some hatred of this old man was now, for the first time, in Red's own eyes. Brinnon's draw had not been fast. His hand was no longer supple. In many ways he could act like a man twenty years his junior, but he could not snap out a gun in the manner of a man of that age.

Also, disregarding the gun, Red looked into his eyes! That was disconcerting. When a man had a gun pointed at his stomach, he generally at least glanced at the gun.

He had that squeamish instant during which he wondered how a bullet in the stomach would feel.

"Brave, ain't you?" Brinnon said weakly.

"No. You won't shoot me. Your daughter an' them punchers saw you an' me ride off together. Better put up your gun, Brinnon."

"Do I go back home?"

"You can go back home or you can go along with me. If you go along, you can just behave yourself."

"Oh, lordy," the proud old cowman moaned.

"As for us quittin'," Red pursued, "why, that'll be all right. I never did like you much, and I don't like you none at all right now. You an' your gunplay! Why, I could have sent a bullet through you while you was fishin' out your gun."

"We'll quit," Brinnon declared.

"An' I'll take Sue away from you. Come fall, she'll move over to my place."

"There'll be flowers for you mebbe," said Brinnon, "but they'll be for your funeral, not for your weddin'."

"You haven't got any nerve," Red asserted.

"What?"

"You heard what I said. You've had an easy time. You had a grandfather and a father back of you. They more than laid the foundation for all you've got. What'd you ever do? Nothin'! You just stepped in when your father died and took over what he and his father had accumulated. Soft! I'd say so!

"All you had to do was to hop to a saddle and ride around and look over what other men—and better men mebbe—had left you. Me, I had to work for mine. I had to do without. I've gone with busted boots an' old clothes and a saddle that was a crime against nature. But I got a start now, and I'm only thirty. You've come down from pioneers. I'm a pioneer in my own right, by thunder!"

"Start, hell!" Brinnon exploded. "You owe for pretty near everything you've got."

"I got my health an' strength," Red retorted. "That's all your grandfather had."

"Well, you leave Sue alone."

"I won't!" Red cried. "She's mine or she's goin' to be mine."

"She'll never get a cent from me."

"She don't want it. You spoke of her starvin'. She won't but she would be willin' to if necessary. She don't share your contempt for cowmen. She's willin' to take a hard chance with the game."

"Contempt?" Brinnon yelled. "Who said I held cowmen in contempt? Ain't I a cowman?"

"Oh, you're a kind of a cowman, but you hire better men to do your work for you."

"Do you want a fight right this minute ?"

"No! Can't fight with Sue's father unless he tries to stop me from marryin' her. You're safe from me."

That was too much for old Brinnon. Safe from him? Safe from any man? Why, he had never been insulted like that before. He could think of nothing to say. He only sat and stared.

"We better be gettin' on," Red said.

He gathered up his slack reins and made as if to start. The old man made no similar movement. His eyes were narrowed now. He seemed to be trying to think things out. When he at last spoke, he showed more self-control than Red had ever seen him show before.

"You been meetin' Sue on the quiet, haven't you?"

"Why, we didn't make no unnecessary noise about it. Yes, I been meetin' her, an' I'm goin' to keep on meetin' her."

"Right under my nose," said Brinnon.

"You got a fair-sized nose."

"Uh huh. Well, let's get on."

Red was tempted to tell the old cowman that he had bluffed him all along the line, as he had bluffed Molliter and Blinky; but he guessed he had better let things ride as they were. An accomplished fact needed no comment.

And the time when a bluff would be useless was probably rapidly approaching!

Red knew that Brinnon had not in the least relented. He didn't care. He was glad that his meetings with Sue were no longer to be clandestine. He had hated that part of their relationship. Old Brinnon couldn't do anything. He had played out his hand right here. Why, he had driven Brinnon into a corner, and he would keep him there, so far as Sue was concerned. Old Brinnon was figuring, and when a man like him stopped to figure, he proved that he was up against it. They rode now in silence till they came to a waterhole. In silence they let their horses drink, and themselves drank. In silence they went on.

"We ain't far from that lava heap," Red then said. "Stop and I'll tell you what to do."

Brinnon pulled down his horse, that angry crimson flush in his cheeks again. "I agreed to let you boss," he said, "but you don't need to rub it in."

"Brinnon," said Red, "does it strike you that this is a taste of your own medicine?"

"I dunno what you mean," Brinnon said in a low tone.

"Oh, yes, you do! You been brow-beatin' people around here for a long time. You got by with it for several reasons. The main reason is that folks know, down deep, you're square. The other reason is that they know you're old."

"They think I'm a dodderin' ol' fool, eh?"

"I never heard anybody call you a fool."

"Well, *you* think I'm in my dotage."

"Mebbe one little remove from that."

"Heh-heh!" Brinnon laughed harshly. "I'll give some of the boys a ride when we've settled this matter. Well, go ahead with your orders. I'll get a kick outa takin' orders from a fella like you. That'll be somethin'."

"We'll ride up behind the rocks," Red said coolly, "We'll dismount there. I'll go on an' see how my friends are gettin' along." He glanced at the westering sun. "Considine will be here before a great while. When he comes, I'll hold up all three of them and bring 'em to you an' lay 'em at your feet."

Brinnon's cheeks paled. The hand that held his reins moved nervously. That was the first sign of nervousness that Red had ever seen in him.

"Red," he said a little unsteadily, calling Starling by his nickname for the first time, "*don't* rub it in. Lemme go with you. Gimme a chance. I been in more jams like this than you ever heard of. I ain't old. Honest to Gawd, I ain't! As you said, I—I've had an easy time. I've took care of myself. I always prided myself on that. My eyes is as good as ever."

"Oh, you're a pretty fair man still," Red acknowledged, "but I can't take you in to them fellas. They'd think somethin' had gone wrong. Y'know, Considine has had a letter from Walters. I never saw that letter, remember. Them two guys could throw me down and I wouldn't know it. I don't want Considine climbin' them rocks an' takin' a shot at me. He's a killer. He killed one man an' got away with it. He'd think he could get away with it if he killed me out here. There wouldn't be nobody to see it but them two hired thugs."

"Well——"

On the one word Brinnon stopped. Red, watching him, saw a crafty look come into his eyes. Those eyes travelled to right, to left, and the old man even turned in his saddle to look behind him. Red knew that he was as well acquainted with this spot as he was with his own sleeping room. What had struck the old duffer? He was planning something.

"What is it?" Red asked.

"What is what? Why, nothin'. I was just lookin' over the place. You always wanta do that when you go into a jam."

"Well, you stay right here. That sun is dippin' fast. I got to get along."

"All right, Starling," Brinnon said. "I'll not move from where I'm settin'."

Puzzled, Red rode on. Brinnon had got doggoned cheerful all of a sudden. What had come over him?

However, Red couldn't puzzle about that for long. He had to plan just what he was going to do. He would have to hold up the two men and disarm them. Then he would have to hide while they signalled Considine in. He didn't believe they would dare give a wrong signal when he had a gun on them.

He whistled shrilly on a crooked finger when he was near the spot where he had left the men. There was no answer. Indeed, Red was suddenly impressed with the desolation of the place, increased by the fact that night was nearing. The place suggested sinister possibilities. It was like a place of death, not of life.

Red sat his horse for a moment, his gun in his hand. Then he realized bitterly that those two thugs had fooled him. He hadn't taken them in. They had let him believe he had, because he had had his gun handy and was fast with it. A fox, Brinnon had called him; but he had let those two cheapskates outwit him.

He hastened on and plunged savagely around the corner of the tumbled-up rocks. No one was in sight. Red sat staring at the dark gray bed. He lifted his eyes to the rough rocks. No one was there. The thugs had fled.

And he had insisted upon being the boss! He had led old Brinnon to the fringe of danger and had gone on by himself. Oh, he was good!

And Brinnon knew more about these things in a minute than Red would learn in many more years. Brinnon had had such experience as had never been Red's. If he had not lagged along, chewing the rag with Brinnon, they would have been here much sooner, possibly in time to stop the men's departure. He had been a fool—all kinds of a fool!

Well, the least he could do would be to eat his humble pie, bitter fruit though it might be made of. He wouldn't excuse himself; he wouldn't try to explain. He would just confront Brinnon and admit that he had fallen down on his job.

His head was up as he went back to Brinnon. There was a sneer of self-contempt on his lips and his eyes were hard from that contempt. Brinnon sat looking at him. He was in no mood to analyze the old man's look. He did not see that a sudden calmness born of understanding had come to Brinnon. Brinnon had a big account in the bank of experience. He was drawing on it now.

"They're gone," Red said simply, his eyes looking straight into Brinnon's in the gathering dusk.

He expected a harsh laugh to break from Brinnon's lips. He expected Brinnon to rail at the futile efforts of a man of this younger generation. Brinnon neither laughed nor railed. Earnestness dwelt upon him, dwelt well, giving him an air of dignity and competence.

"Lemme have a look, son," he said. "Men can't move even on a lava bed without leavin' a faint sign."

It was as if Brinnon had dropped those twenty years which seemed not to be his physically. He was handling himself like a man of fifty.

So, temporarily at least, Red relinquished his leadership. He rode behind Brinnon to the corner of the rocks. There Brinnon paused. He listened with bent head. He was perfectly motionless, seeming not to breathe. Red tried to follow his example but had to open his lips, so that his own quickened breathing should make no sound as it passed through distended nostrils.

"No sound," said Brinnon at last. "I don't think anybody is here. I don't get the feel of anybody. Come on."

Red saw he had misjudged the old man. Brinnon might hold himself to be an overlord, but when he had a job of work to do he went about it as a man should. He was considering everything. He was taking no chances. And despite his years, he was as alert as Red himself. He had listened. He had stilled his old body so that he might feel for the men, thrusting out his wary consciousness to meet theirs. He had heard nothing, felt nothing. So he was going on.

Red followed him to the spot at which he had left the two men. Brinnon approached that spot cautiously, waving Red to a standstill with a hand thrust back.

Those old eyes were keen for what there was to see. The signs, Red new, were minute. A little lava dust might have been powdered down beneath a heel. That would be all. Brinnon, the night having arrived, had to light matches. He displayed his utter confidence in his judgment by doing that, for he thus became a target if anyone should be near by.

Brinnon seemed to be finding the dust. After a long scrutiny, kneeling, he straightened up and moved forward till his eyes were above what would have been the next step taken by a man.

He covered perhaps ten feet in that way and then he seemed to Red definitely to be held by something disclosed by the light from another match. His head was dropped close to the bed. He put out a hand and touched the rock with a forefinger. The match went out, but Red could just see him touch the finger to his lips. Then he drew it slowly across the lava directly beneath his eyes. In the light from still another match, he held up the finger and looked at it. He got to his feet slowly and stood still.

Red knew that he had found something, and if Red had been in his previous mood, he would have hastened to his side and would have demanded to know what he had discovered. But that mood was gone. He and Brinnon were on a hunt together now, with nobody the boss—unless,

indeed, Brinnon had become that. At any rate Red was satisfied to wait for him.

Brinnon stared around into the darkness for a while. All the space, inclosed by those forbidding rocks, was silent. Even no animals lived in here, or prowled. It was an abandoned place. However, Red did not let that weigh him down. His interest was in Brinnon to the exclusion of everything else.

" Come here," Brinnon at last said.

He did not say either " Red," " fella " or " Starling." He was too interested in what he had found. One thing Red was sure of : All anger, for the time, all resentment, had gone out of him.

Red went up to his side. Brinnon held out his hand, the forefinger extended beyond the other fingers. He told Red to light a match. In its light Red saw that there was a stain on the extended finger.

" Blood," said Brinnon.

CHAPTER IX

" You're Figurin' "

Red recoiled a little. He remembered having seen those two men against each other. Had the seed he had planted in the heart of each borne fatal fruit already ? Had one killed the other ? Then had the murderer, in possible panic, fled ? If that were so, Red was, in a way, a murderer himself. He had been hard when he had acted as he had done, but the result seemed rather ghastly.

He explained that to Brinnon.

" What of it ?" Brinnon asked in astonishment. " If they're killin' each other off, so much the better. They were on murder bent. The hand o' fate'd be in it if they turned on each other. Don't think nothin' about that."

Brinnon was toughening, Red saw. He had said " son " once ; now he was using " fella." Red himself toughened. He wasn't a wise guy, but he could go on. He could hit the trail harder than Brinnon could.

Brinnon narrowed his eyes and looked beyond him. " Well," he said, " I got quite a little job ahead o' me. If one o' them fellas is dead, the other has carried him away, a little distance anyhow. We'll have to see."

He went to his knees again and began painstakingly to read the sign which the moving man, or men, had made. Little by little he followed it out to the sand, Red following. Red let him do the job, for Red was having all he could do to contain himself. " I got a job," Brinnon had said. If he thought he

had taken everything over, he was fooling himself, Red silently asserted.

"Nobody's dead," Brinnon said. "Three men, near as I can make out, left here."

"Considine came ahead of time," said Red.

Brinnon nodded approval and stated: "You're figurin'."

"There's one thing that was gonna give all three of them fellas a shock," Red went on. "I didn't tell you about that. When Considine rode in here he was on Blinky's horse and Blinky had his horse. Considine might have thought that somethin' had gone wrong or that he wasn't meetin' up with the right men and have opened fire."

"Be a good joke that."

"Why did them fellas go away on foot?" Red asked.

"We'll find out about that."

He began to follow the tracks. Since the darkness had thickened he had to stoop low. At the end of a hundred feet he straightened up. He stared about him for a space into the darkness.

"Hoofprints," he reported. "Here as near as I can figure out is what happened. There was three men here altogether. One of them must have been Considine because there was only two here when you left. All three, or mebbe two, had a fallin' out. There was gunplay. One man got a bullet into him. That accounts for the blood. The man couldn't have been hurt bad. He walked to here and mounted. He mounted by himself. There's no sign he was helped into the saddle.

"There was a ruckus. The horses had wandered out here while it was goin' on. The men come out an' took up the horses. Then they rode away. They rode north. Where'd they go? That's the question?"

"There's another question," Red said. "Was one man or mebbe two prisoners? Did Considine win the fight or did Blinky and Molliter? Or did all three mebbe patch up their diff'runces?"

"Dunno."

Red stared into the north. The flat stretched far away in that direction. No ranch houses were over there for many miles. Considine would have no chance to meet up with Brinnon if he continued to head in that direction. However, there was nothing to prevent his turning east.

"Tell you what, Brinnon," Red said suddenly, as his mind travelled over the flat. "Them fellas are headed for Juniper Creek."

"It's a good guess," Brinnon declared. "They could ride the creek for a mile and in a short time the water would be floatin' down as clear as ever. Hard bottom."

"If they followed the creek, they would be headed toward your place," Red said.

" Considine wouldn't head for my place. He ain't got the nerve."

" Wouldn't the prospect of a wad of money give nerve to a man like Considine ?" Red asked. " Y'know, he killed one man out of hand, just because he was pooched at him. He knows his welcome in this man's country is wearin' out. He went so far as to try to get me today."

" What was he tryin' to get you for ?" Brinnon asked.

" I put my mark on him a month ago. I was waitin' for Sue on the Sinton Road. It was about as dark as it is now, an' I was drawed up by the roadside."

" Keepin' out o' sight, huh. Waitin' for Sue."

" Oh, don't start that stuff again. It's lucky I was keepin' outa sight. Sue come joggin' along down the road. A man spurred his horse out from a clump of trees and rode up to her. He reached over and put a hand on her rein. I wasn't more'n twenty feet from him and my horse made that in about two jumps.

" I dragged the fella outa his saddle and hopped down from my own. I got one good wallop to him, right at the edge of his eye. Why, seemed to me the eye started to swell before my fist left it, and it was laid wide open. He looked up at me and saw who I was and then I put him to sleep with a good one under the chin. He just slumped and lay still, and Sue and me rode away."

" And that man was Considine ?" Brinnon asked, as if he wanted the statement made emphatically.

Red made it emphatically : " It was Considine."

Brinnon was very angry, but he did not wholly give way to his anger. Another thought struck him.

" You slugged Considine and then turned your back on him. He was pepperin' at you today and you let him go. I didn't know there was any fightin' men like that left around here, since Walters' outfit blowed."

" I wouldn't be too sure that that outfit has blowed, permanent," Red said. " We know Walters ain't givin' up. Besides, mebbe you spend too much of your time lookin' backwards. Mebbe you got this present generation sized up wrong."

" You can't get it outa your head that I'm old, can you ?" Brinnon snapped. " Well, let's get on to Juniper Creek. We're wastin' time here."

" We'll go back to the horses," Red said.

As they mounted, Brinnon sneered : " So Considine thinks he's gonna put a bullet into me. Shucks !"

Red wished he had used a stronger word than " shucks." That word indicated that he thought that it would be impossible for Considine to kill him. Nothing was impossible when a sneak had a loaded gun in his hand.

They started their horses and rode for what seemed a long

time. The darkness was so thick that they could see only for a short distance, but both men knew the country and they kept toward their destination without effort.

Presently there was a sort of silvery lightening in the east. This held for a little and then the edge of the full-moon appeared. It came up over the horizon leisurely, and it seemed to stand there for a moment while it took a slow survey of the earth above which it was to travel. The face of the man in it was distinct. It struck Red as being a particularly rugged, smiling face tonight. The sky was so clear that there was a far-flung radiance from the great orb.

"Some moon, Brinnon," said Red.

Brinnon did not turn his head to look at it. Instead his head sank till he was looking at his saddle horn.

"I've seen that moon come up many times," he said. "Sue's mother an' me sat an' watched it the first night we really got acquainted. She was a town girl. She worked in a restaurant. She come out here to help my mother when my mother's health begun to fail. Me an' the girl was married before the full-moon come again.

"We lived together for twenty years without never a harsh word between us. Then Sue came. My wife died within the week. I brought Sue up. I been mother and father to her."

He turned in his saddle to look at Red, and then he added fiercely: "I'd like to see any cowpuncher take Sue from me. I *am* old. I know it better'n anybody. I'm livin' a good deal on my nerve. When I go down, it'll be with a crash. I'll keep Sue till then. It won't happen for several years yet, and by that time she'll have more sense about men." His jaw took on the line of determination that Red knew so well.

"You seem to forget that Sue and I are goin' to be married come fall," Red said.

"Come fall! Come fall! To hell with the fall! You ain't gonna marry her while I can raise my hand with a gun in it."

"You're a damned old fool," Red said wrathfully. "S'posin' somebody had stepped in between you an' the girl you married."

"He'd have had a fight on his hands," said Brinnon illogically. "A fight was a fight in them days. Fact is, my father was set against me marryin' a town girl, but I said nothin' could stop me."

Red sighed. He had thought the old fellow was going to soften, but in the end he was proving himself about as soft as a hard-boiled egg. Something had touched him for a moment, and he had spoken thoughts which Red supposed were in his mind a good deal of the time. Then he had stiffened. Queer old duck! Always figuring things out from his own point of view. "I smell the water of Juniper Creek," Red said after a while.

"I been smellin' it for the last mile," Brinnon asserted.

Old boaster! There wasn't anything he couldn't do better and quicker than anybody else.

They drew their horses down and rode slowly till they were in the shadow of the trees which gave the creek its name. Brinnon slipped from his horse and walked to the water's edge and examined the bank.

"Nothin' here," he said. "We better follow the stream."

He put up a hand to mount and then he suddenly clapped a hand over his horse's nose. Red, leaning down, did the same. From down the creek had come the nickering of a horse.

"What do you think about following the stream now?" Red jeered for he was still nettled by what Brinnon had said about smelling the water from afar.

"I always been lucky," Brinnon stated. "That horse nickerin' is just part of my luck."

Red chuckled mirthlessly. The old boy claimed the breaks of luck as if he had created them.

"We better get in among the trees," Red said. "Whoever owns that horse will know that there's another horse nearby. If it's Molliter or Blinky, he may come to have a look."

"Or ride off hell-bent," said Brinnon. Red had to admit to himself that there was something in that. Brinnon went on: "Stay here a minute."

He went among the trees, which grew on a slight slope and in a few minutes he was back. "There's a little grass in there," he said. "Get down an' bring your horse along. They'll keep quiet while they nibble."

When they were led in, the horses went hungrily at the grass. There needed to be no argument between them as to who should lead now, for they had to make their way among the trees, and there was some dodging of them to do, so that they were side by side or one behind the other as one made the fastest progress.

As they neared the spot from which the sound had come, they slowed down and went forward with the utmost care. The summer had been dry, and a small twig would pop if it were stepped upon. They came first, suddenly, in a cleared space, upon two horses. One of these was the calico horse which Red had taken from Considine. The other was the animal which Molliter had ridden.

There was no way of telling, then, whether Molliter and Considine were in the vicinity or Molliter and Blinky. Considine might had reclaimed his pinto. Red had a notion he would keep whichever horse would best serve his purpose for the night. In any event it looked as if one man had gone forward, leaving the others behind.

Red and Brinnon stopped, thinking the horses might shy away from them or repeat the sound which one of them had made before. But the animals only looked at them mildly. The calico horse seemed inclined to a deceptive mildness when

there was no one forking him, a characteristic of many very vicious horses.

Red held up a hand as a sign for Brinnon to stay where he was. The two men had a notion that the riders of the horses were not far away, and so Brinnon could not argue against Red's silent order. Red went forward, past the horses, with the silence of a pad-foot animal stalking its prey. The edge of the trees was half a dozen feet from him, and when he was safely past the horses he stepped out there. He leaned and looked along the bank.

Two men were sitting beyond and below him. One was looking at the water. Now and then, as Red watched him he took up a pebble and cast it into the shallow stream. The other man had his arms folded on his drawn-up knees and his head rested wearily on his arms. That man, Red judged, was Molliter and the other was Blinky.

From his position, Molliter, Red was sure, was the man who had been shot. He seemed to be all in. His motionlessness appeared to be due to utter fatigue. The men's guns, Red thought, were still on them. He believed he could make out the dull butts. Pursuit and capture were apparently remote from their thinking.

Apparently, yes! But caution came to Red. He told himself: "Don't be in a hurry, fella. You got lots o' time if them fellas are alone. If they ain't, you may have lots of eternity."

For Red had remembered that Considine, the killer, was abroad. Considine might have set this scene. He might have expected Red to follow the trail. Right now he might be hiding beneath the bank's overhang. What he would do to Red Starling, given one more chance, would be sufficient.

But Red could not remain all night where he was, staring down at those two stupid men. He began to move slowly along toward the edge of the overhang. Sometime this creek must have been a larger stream, for instead of having a sloping bank down to it, the bank dropped from the rim of the overhang straight down. When Red was a short distance from the edge, he dropped to his stomach and crawled along. Presently he was able to see for some distance in both directions under the rim.

No one was in sight. The drop from where he lay was no more than six feet, and he would alight in sand. He decided to take the chance. He did not believe Considine was nearby. If he had been, he would have left his horse with the other two to prevent its nickering to the others.

Red rose slowly, his eyes glued to the two men. He drew his gun carefully as if he feared its metal might rasp against the leather. Then he went so close to the rim that the toes of his boots were somewhat beyond it. With his eyes still on the men, he leaped.

He struck the sand and managed to keep to his feet. The

men were only a short distance from him, and he put his gun on them.

They had heard him!

Molliter lifted his head but made no further move. Only Blinky's hand stirred. It went to the butt of his gun, but then he hesitated to draw. He seemed to realize that if anyone was behind him, that person had him fully covered. He removed the hand. His gun raised, Red stepped forward.

"Don't move again, you two," he ordered. "I'm payin' you a little visit. You didn't stay put, but that's all right. I got a gun on you an' I'll just have to take your guns. That was a poor move you made, Blinky. I might have drilled you. Here I come. Set still!"

Red took their guns. Blinky then turned his head. His face, Red saw in the moonlight, was pale and drawn. Molliter's head came higher, but turning it seemed to require too great an effort. He merely stared straight in front of him.

Brinnon appeared on the rim and yelled to Red. Red turned and waved a violent hand.

"Is Considine around, Blinky?" Red demanded. "Tell me the truth or I'll plug you. If Considine shows up, I'll plug you anyways."

"He ain't here," Blinky snapped.

Brinnon had been silent for that long, but he could not remain silent longer. He yelled down to Red: "You played me dirty! You got me where I couldn't object, an' then you rushed in an' held up them two. A fine pardner you are!"

Red hadn't noticed that he and Brinnon had been pardners, but now he was becoming used to Brinnon's vagaries and inconsistencies.

"Stay where you are!" Red called. "Only Molliter and Blinky is here. I don't know yet where Considine is."

"To hell with Considine!" Brinnon screamed. "You think I'm afraid of him? I'm comin' down there."

Safe to turn his head, Red looked at the old man. Would he, with his brittle bones, be fool enough to try to leap as Red had done? Brinnon stepped along the rim, stepped back like a cat on a wall, calculating a descent from the height.

He didn't leap. He called to Red: "Hold everything up till I get there."

He disappeared from Red's view among the trees and then reappeared farther along. He had to do that several times before he found a slope which permitted him to come down. In a moment he was hastening toward Red.

"What you think would have happened to you if Considine had been hiding out along there?" Red asked.

"I had my gun in my hand," Brinnon explained, and that seemed to satisfy him at least.

Red had to be satisfied, too, since nothing had happened to the old cowman. He turned his attention to Blinky and Molliter.

" Now, you fellas come clean and in a hurry," he ordered. " Who shot Molliter ?"

" He done it," Molliter, jerking a thumb toward Blinky, answered. Very briefly he let his smouldering eyes rest on Blinky and then he raised them to Red's face. Fire leaped into them. " An' you, yuh whelp, yuh set him on to me. You double-crossed the both of us, an' Blinky fell for it. Yuh was tryin' to get one of us to murder the other."

" Your thoughts run to murder, don't they ?" Red asked.

" You'll find out," Molliter declared.

" You threatenin' us ?" Brinnon demanded, and moved around in front of Molliter and thrust his gun against Molliter's forehead.

Molliter turned his head aside to try to get it away from that gun. Brinnon moved the gun swiftly. Molliter grew still.

" Who you ?" Molliter asked.

" Brinnon."

" Brinnon ?"

Molliter looked at the old man, looked at Red. He was too astounded for speech.

" I didn't have a gunfight with him over yonder today," Red said. " My fight was with Considine. Didn't he tell you ?"

" He don't tell nothin'," Molliter grumbled. " So you an' Brinnon is lined up, huh ?"

" In a way. Blinky, what happened between you and Molliter ? Make it snappy."

" Why, that sucker went for his gun. I had my back to him an' just happened to turn around as he made his first move. He was gonna lemme have it in the back. I drawed while he was caressin' the gun butt, an' I plugged him. I had to shoot on the draw or I'd have got him where he lives."

" A bullet in Molliter's arm was the end of the fight, was it ?" Red jeered.

" It wouldn't have been the end of the fight if it hadn't been for that cussed Considine," Blinky said. " He——"

" Yuh better shut yore mouth about that guy," Molliter interrupted.

" I'll kill him !" Blinky's face was twisted from passion, but suddenly it cleared and he harshly laughed. " I got an idea ! " he went on. " It's a peach !"

All the men stared at him. He was caught but he seemed happy.

CHAPTER X

Red Insists

Red was the first to recover. He suspected that Blinky was trying to be clever again. Still the look on his face seemed genuine, and his eyes were aglow and the lashes flying. He had acted that way when he was really excited.

" Don't try to frame anything up, Blinky," Red warned. " Go on. If you lie—well, go on."

" Say, you thought you was smart when you let on to us that you was Considine, didn't yuh ?" Blinky asked.

" I didn't do any lettin' on," Red told him. " *You* an' Molliter said I was Considine."

" Yuh didn't deny it. I never seen so many redheads in one man's country before !"

" Only two. That ain't many."

" Well, anyways, you're on Considine's trail an' that's good news. I'll let you an' him shoot it out."

" Considine will kill you for this, Blinky," Molliter broke in. " If ever there was a killer, that fella is it. Yuh can see it in his eyes."

" I'm backin' *this* redhead," said Blinky. " He's cool. He's tricky. He's smooth. Considine is a rough neck. He don't know nothin' but shootin'. This guy'll get him. Anyhow, we're safe for the time bein'. This fella ain't gonna let us go. Ain't that right, Red ?"

" Oh, I aint' much int'rusted in you," Red said. " I'm after Considine. You might get a chance to go back on the trail you come over."

" For one, I'll take the chance," Blinky said hopefully. " Well, the fight between me an' Molliter didn't go no farther because Considine wouldn't let it.

" I'd no sooner fired the one shot than a voice come from near us to stick up our hands. I stuck mine up an' Molliter got his good one up. That voice had the real ring in it, fella. I've been in some shootin's an' I know when a man means what he says. I looked over my shoulder, an' there was Considine. I knowed he was Considine right off'n the reel.

" Then I seen what a sucker you'd made of us. That guy was standin' there behind me, with his legs spread an' a gun in his hand. His face was stuck out in front of him, and his eyes was enough to make a man shiver.

" 'What', says Considine, 'do you two damn fools think you're doin', shootin' it out between yourselves ?'

" I explained to him fast. He grinned. He said we was the world's two prize suckers, an' I didn't have to be tol' that. He

tol' us that he'd put a bullet into the first of us that didn't do exactly what he said. He had that letter from Walters, an' he was keen to get the details about the money. Why, he licked his lips when we tol' him."

"Did you see the letter?" Red asked.

"Seen it, yes, an' read it."

"What'd it say?"

"Tol' who we was, where we'd meet Considine, where the money would be."

"And the money's in the bank in town?"

"That's it. Well, Considine says to us: 'You're precious. Make your peace together an' be the best of friends till I get that roll. Then you can make sieves of each other if you want to."

"Did you tell Considine where you was to meet the fella that banked the money?"

"Why, he's in town, waitin'."

"What kinda lookin' man?"

"Tall, not so very thin, not fat like Molliter here neither. Just well built. I think his hair an' eyes kinda brown."

"Any marks on him?" Red asked.

"No. One thing, he shaves clean. He semes to have a bug on keepin' whiskers off'n his face."

"Face kinda pinkish?"

"Yeh. Lotsa colour in it."

"I thought you couldn't describe him?" Red sneered.

"I've done it, best I can. You better look out for him, too."

"I intend to. Well, what happened next?"

"Our horses had stepped out into the sand. We got them an' mounted. Considine made me keep the calico horse.

"'If we meet anybody, they'll think you're me,' he said. 'You'll prob'ly get a bullet. I got a better horse anyhow.'

"He did have a better horse, not mine. It was a big black, That fella Considine can ride. That black was a handful for any man, but he bowed his head before Considine."

"That horse have a white left hind foot and a streak of white down his face?" Red asked.

"That's him. I couldn't help noticin' it. That white stood out like the whites of a nigger's eyes."

Red glanced around at Brinnon and grinned. "What do you think of that, Brinnon?" he asked.

"Considine took that black horse from them you got over beyond Singleton's, in that pasture over there."

"I've seen horse thieves hung before this," Brinnon declared. He spoke as if Considine had now committed the unpardonable sin. Considine had designs on his life. Considine had attempted to insult his beloved daughter. And now Considine had stolen a horse! The theft of the horse, in Brinnon's opinion, was the fitting climax!

"Well, Considine herded us over here," Blinky went on.

"He told us not to leave. He said if we tried to, our lives wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. He said he had four other men on this job an' he didn't b'l'eve we could guess where we would run on to them."

"Four-flusher!" Brinnon said. "There ain't four men in the world that'd folla that guy."

"How could we tell?" Blinky muttered. "He said he would kill us anyhow. The fella is a born killer. I know the breed."

"Considine brought you here an' left you here, sewed up as you thought," Red said. "Now, where did he go?"

"You wait a minute," Molliter broke in. "We're in a jam. Any damn fool could see that. We gotta get out of it. Let's dicker."

"Shoot it," Red said.

"If we help yuh to find Considine, do yuh set us free?"

"You'll have to leave that to me," Red said. "I'll promise you nothin'."

"That's talk," said Brinnon.

"You get nothin' outa us, then," Molliter declared.

Brinnon walked up behind Molliter. He held the butt of his gun firmly and raised the gun above Molliter's head. That was always an effective play with a weak crook.

"Ever have your head smashed in by a gun bar'l, fella?" Brinnon asked.

Molliter shrank down and away. A sudden fear of this old man with the blazing eyes seemed to possess him.

"Don't do it, ol'-timer" he pleaded.

"Where's Considine?" Brinnon asked.

"Well, he figgered for a long time. He said he was honin' to go to your place. He said he was gonna kill you on gen'rul principles, you an' Red here. Then he said that when he got the two jobs done, he'd better be ready to blow fast. So he decided to go to town, to see the fella that banked the money."

"What's that fella's name?" Red put in.

"Felt."

"How long since Considine left?"

"'Bout an hour before sundown."

"Consider this next question well," Red ordered: "Considine wasn't goin' straight to town, was he? He wouldn't wanta get in there long toward midnight. He don't know but what we sent reports to town ahead of him. He'd sneak in."

"Why he——" Molliter began.

"Watch it!" Blinky warned.

Red was just behind Blinky. A sudden exasperation seized him. He put a foot between Blinky's shoulders and pushed hard. Blinky was bent double, Red still pressing, and to escape, Blinky rolled over on his side. He lay there, gasping and Red knew that came from fury.

"Get up!" Red ordered.

Blinky came to a sitting position again. Red said : "You're tellin' Molliter what to do. Now I'll tell you. You an' Molliter an' Considine is all lined up together. You an' Molliter is scared outa your skins by Considine. You better be scared o' Brinnon. You think Considine is a hellbender. Well, you don't know Brinnon. He's li'ble to take you both apart."

" An'," said Brinnon, " I might as well do that little thing right now—on'y I'll do it with my gun. There ain't no room for crooks in this country."

" Considine spoke of Singleton's place," Blinky said. " He tol' us there was a wooded stream over there, one o' the many streams that seems to be in this country. He was gonna hide amongst the trees till it was time for him to start for town, to get there around midnight."

" I know the place," Red said. " Whatcha wanta do with these fellas, Brinnon ?"

" Take 'em home an' tuck 'em under blankets for a while," Brinnon said, attempting, Red thought, to be funny for the first time ; and Red believed his spirits had risen because he was in the thick of things now, and was going to continue to be so.

" Let's get goin'," Red said.

" We've tol' you everything," Molliter complained. " Yuh oughta let us go."

" I spoke about tuckin' you under blankets," said Brinnon. " You was plannin' to have me buried under sand. Come right along, gents. You'll prob'ly be treated real good."

They soon rode toward Brinnon's. Arrived there, Brinnon and Red found a big group of punchers waiting. They had nothing to say about the prisoners. Punchers' silence was the thing for them. Brinnon told the men to hold the two for awhile. He relented sufficiently to say they should be fed and have water.

" We better get fresh horses, Red," Brinnon then said.

Sue came out of the house and walked up to the young man and the old.

" Is it all over, Red ?" she asked.

" It's hardly begun," Red answered. " *I'm* ridin' over beyond Singleton's to find a fella named Considine."

Brinnon caught the emphasis and cried : " *You're* ridin'? You think you're ridin' alone ?"

" Yeh. I can't tell when I'll be back. I don't want you to stay up all night."

" Why, I——"

" Father," said Sue gently, " you know Red's right. You need your sleep."

The old man suddenly looked wistfully away across the moonlight-flooded flat. His body drooped a little, and he looked tired.

" Will you take a coupla my men with you ?" he asked.

"I'll do better alone," Red said. "Considine is only one man—and I'm one, I s'pose."

He was giving Brinnon an opening to say that he was a man, but Brinnon wouldn't do it. He would have done it if there had been no Sue, but if he did, he seemed afraid that Red would think he was yielding all along the line. To escape the whole business, he started toward the house, calling over his shoulder: "You can have the pick of my horses."

Red got a fresh horse and led it down to where Sue still stood. She asked: "Did you make any headway with my father?"

"Not much, I guess. Once in a while he acted like he was goin' to soften up but then he froze again."

"Is this Considine bad, Red?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Bag o' wind, I reckon."

"You won't kill unless you have to?"

"No! I wanta give him rope. There's Walters still way up there at the top. We gotta think of him ahead of Considine. These hired killers don't amount to much."

"Careful does it, Red."

"You bet!"

No puncher was observing them, and Brinnon was now within the house. Red stooped and kissed Sue.

"I'm beginnin' to think you're some girl," he said.

"You're quite a fella, your own self."

That, Red knew, was sufficient for her. What she felt she would conceal. She would worry but no one here would know she was worrying. Game! That was the word for her, Red told himself—one of the words, at least. There were many more.

He mounted and smiled down at her and she smiled up at him. Then he rode away.

He was some eight miles from the creek toward which he was now headed, and he forced the fresh horse to make time along the road. When he came to a small wooden bridge over the stream, he crossed it and then began to follow the stream. He knew that Considine would not be hiding near the road. In fact, he believed he could guess where the man was.

About two miles distant there was a bend in the stream. A man could stand out from this bend and if anyone came from the road, he could see him and flee without his being seen till the man came to the bend. However, that bend was on the opposite side of the creek from Red now, and the ground over which Red's horse travelled was soft. Red was confident he could get within a little way of where Considine was without Considine's hearing him.

When he knew that that little way only intervened, he dismounted and fastened his horse to a tree. The trees were abundant. In the soft, watered ground, they grew out from the creek for a distance of fifty feet. They were small and grew

close together. Believing it safe to do so, Red went swiftly but soundlessly along the fringe of the trees till he was opposite the bend. Then he stopped and drew up to the first of the trees. He stood there motionless.

The night was quiet, with no breeze, and the leaves of the trees did not even stir. If Considine was beyond the trees and the creek, he must be motionless and silent—or asleep.

Red returned to his horse and took down his rope, an idea having come to him belatedly.

Returning to the same spot, he again listened, but once more there was no sound. Red started through the trees on his side. His progress was extremely slow. He had to turn and edge through some of the trees, so that he should not disturb them. When he came to the creek, he was forced to wade it with the slowest of steps. However, when he gained the opposite side, he was sure that Considine, if he were there, had not heard him.

Now his difficulties increased. He was near Considine, and he still had to pass through trees on this side. He looked along the fringe but found no special opening. One place appeared to be as good as another, so he stepped in among the trees directly in front of him.

He believed that fifteen minutes passed before he was at the side nearest Considine. However, he also believed that he had made no sound. He had not been able to hear the brushing of his clothing against the tree trunks, so slow had been his forward movements. He stood for a moment listening, heard nothing, leaned, and peered out.

Considine was not fifteen feet from him, seated on the ground by his horse's side. He held the reins in his hand, and his head was on his chest. The horse's head also drooped. Both horse and man, Red was convinced, slept. He stepped into the open as softly as he had come among the trees.

Giving himself sufficient room, he whirled his rope, shot the loop. The loop fell over Considine's head, and Red tightened it about his arms and pulled him over on his side. Considine's face was toward him, but the man had had his hat brim pulled over his eyes and the hat remained on his head. He could not raise a hand to push it back.

Red rushed in and struck Considine on the side of the jaw twice. The man shivered and lay still. Red removed his rope and groped in an inside pocket of Considine's clothing. He found a letter without an enclosing envelope. Pulling it out, he read it. It was the letter he sought.

There was hardly anything to it: "Five thousand. By another man. In bank. Get busy, I tell you."

The letter, Red was convinced, was written in a disguised hand or by someone other than Walters. His guess was that Walters wrote neatly. That was the kind of hombre he was. He would not be guilty of this irregular scrawl.

Putting the letter into his own pocket, Red hurried back to his horse and headed it toward town.

CHAPTER XI

No Money

Red considered his visit to the banker an open-and-shut thing, so far as the banker was concerned; but he believed he would have to be careful, for Considine or other men might be in town, possibly looking for him. Besides Considine, five other men had been mentioned, so far. Walters had hired thugs in the past. For all Red knew, he might have a swarm of them here.

This was a one-street town, twenty miles removed from the county seat, so that Red had no sheriff to appeal to, even if he would have appealed. There was a town marshal, but he was an old man, and for the present, in view of Brinnon's conduct, Red had had enough of old men.

The bank was halfway down the street, in a small building housing no other enterprise. The banker's home was the last house on the street in Red's direction. Red therefore dismounted in front of the house.

More than half the other buildings in the place housed saloons, and there was one in the building second to the banker's house. As Red was about to start for the banker's front door, two men came out of that saloon. Red immediately saw that they were men who lived in the town. Apparently they had gone into the saloon to get a nightcap. They started toward Red, and he could not make up his mind why they did so. They could not live beyond the banker's house.

When they came opposite his horse, they stopped, and he busied himself with a cinch. One man said: "Thought you was somebody else."

Then they went back along the board walk, and Red stared after them. They might be some of Walters' men, and he would have liked to follow them to see where they went, but he could not put off his busines with the banker. Though there was a light in the front room, the banker might go to bed. The town was only a short distance from the stream where Red had found Considine, but considerable time had elapsed since sunset.

Red dragged his reins and went up to the front door. The banker himself opened the door. Red saved what little money he could, and he had an account with the bank, so that the banker knew him.

"Come in, Starling," he said. "It's after banking hours, you know, and I never keep money in the house. One of you cowboys might take it into his head to rob me."

The banker was a former cowman, and he still had a soft place in his heart for all cowmen and punchers. He smiled at Red and told him to have a seat.

" I could give you a drink, though," he added.

" No," Red said. " I got too much business to attend to." He drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to the banker. The banker read it.

" Doesn't tell much," he said.

" Mr. Warren," said Red, " I'll explain it."

He told the banker all he knew, including his having taken the letter from Considine.

" I heard about that Brinnon-Walters thing," Warren said. " Old Brinnon's a good man, but he loses his temper too easy. About his daughter, now . . . ."

" Yeh, that's right," Red said. " I'm goin' to marry her."

" And Brinnon says no ? "

" A dozen or so noes."

" They won't stop you ? "

" Sh'd say not."

" Well, what do you want me to do? "

" One o' Walters' men has left five thousand at your bank. He——"

" Who runs my bank ? " Warren inquired.

" Why, I reckon you do."

" Then I ought to know something about the bank's business. Neither one of Walters' men nor anybody else has deposited five thousand dollars in the bank, at one time, in the last three months."

" She breaks three ways, then," Red said. " One of three ways. Either Blinky and Molliter lied to me or Walters sent no money or that fella that he sent it by is holdin' onto it."

" I'd say the last idea was the correct one."

" Gimme a minute," Red said.

He bent his head in thought. He recalled that Walters had been said to be dissatisfied with the way Considine was going after Brinnon. It might be that Blinky and Molliter had been sent down here to fool Considine. Walters might have paid the five thousand to that other man and he might be going to do the job. Walters might merely be putting himself in a position to deny that Considine had done it if Considine should make a claim.

A new thought brought Red straight up in his chair.

" What is it now ? " Warren asked.

" Why, mebbe Considine wasn't to get that money," Red answered.

He explained what had run through his mind and added: " I got an idea that Considine is to be killed. Y'see, Walters aimed to have him kill Brinnon, but he was slow. Considine would have a story to tell if somebody else killed Brinnon."

" Seems logical enough. Well, what do you aim to do, Red ? "

"I oughta find the man that's got the five thousand. He might be right here in town."

"There's only one place he could be staying at," said Warren. "That's Mrs. Kerry's rooming house halfway down the street. Red, don't you think you'd better have some help?"

"To go up against one crook?"

"Perhaps more—and all killers."

"I'd rather tackle the job alone. Y'see, Mr. Warren, Sue Brinnon don't wanta leave her father till he gives his consent to our marriage. She'll do it, this fall, if she has to, but I'm afraid she don't feel so good about it. If I can pull somethin' off, mebbe I can prove to Brinnon that I ain't altogether a saphead."

"Brinnon would like you after you'd made a play like that," Warren agreed. "He'd have to admit you had saved him."

"Thought of that makes him mad."

"Oh, I know Brinnon. He's a good deal of a fuss budget when he loses his temper, but he admires a fightin' man. I have an idea he has a sneakin' admiration for you already."

"If he has, he hides it good," Red smiled.

"Well, go ahead."

Red went back to his horse. There was, as he knew, a stable behind Mrs. Kerry's rooming house, but he did not want to put his horse in it. He rode around the banker's house and out on the flat and left the animal there. Then he went to the rooming house. Red had never been in the place before, since he had never had enough money to spare to spend the night in town, and, additionally, he had never cared to do that.

The street door admitted him to a parlour furnished with horsehair chairs and sofa. A hanging lamp was burning. Red did not know whether a new roomer merely found a room for himself or whether he was supposed to rout out Mrs. Kerry. He wanted to see her; she might tell him whether strangers to her were in the house.

There was a door beyond him, apparently leading into another room, and after a moment of hesitation he went up to it and knocked on it.

"What is it?" a woman asked.

"Mrs. Kerry?"

"Nobody else. If you want a room, climb the stairs an' pick out one that nobody else is in. Don't sneak away in the morning before I'm up. I like to be paid."

"I gotta see you a minute," Red said. "I'm a cowman from out Brinnon's way."

"Oh, all right."

There was no creaking of bed springs, for Mrs. Kerry slept on feathers. She soon opened the door, holding a wrapper about her ample body. Red had expected an impatient, angry woman, but Mrs. Kerry's small eyes twinkled.

"Well, sir," she said. "What can I do for you, my good man ?"

"Who tol' you I was a good man ?"

Mrs. Kerry waddled over to the sofa and sank down on it. "Think I don't know you?" she asked. "You're Red Starling. I've seen you in one of the stores gettin' supplies. I make it my business to ask who anybody I don't know is. Story is around that you're goin' to marry Sue Brinnon an' that the ol' fire-eater, her father, won't let you. You go right ahead, lad. You don't drink or gamble. You're gettin' along. You'll make that girl a fine husband."

While Mrs. Kerry paused to get her breath, Red stared at her, speechless. It took Mrs. Kerry a little while to get that breath, and Red at last managed to ask: "Does everybody know about me an' my business ?"

"O' course not! I picked it up little by little, and I don't gossip. You an' Sue Brinnon was in town together about two months ago. I seen you. That was enough for me. Well, never mind, my boy. Just marry your Sue an' be happy. Don't let ol' Brinnon stop you. He'll be passin' along before many years have gone by. Now, what do you want ?"

"I'm lookin' for a man," Red said.

"An' you think he might have a room in my house ? Not impossible. I don't harbour crooks if I know they're crooks, but I can't make every man that drifts along prove himself. What's your man look like ?"

Red described the man who had a liking for a smoothshaven face. Mrs. Kerry did not at once say whether he had a room or not.

"Starling," she asked, "is the man a crook ?"

"One of the worst."

"He's here. Least he's got a room here. Whether he's in it or not this minute I dunno, but I ain't got the least objections to you findin' out. His room is on this floor. I offered him a cheaper room upstairs but he said he wanted to be down. You can go along the hall to the very end, and his room'll be at your right. You're wearin' a gun in my house an' that ain't p'lite; but I'll overlook it. Try not to have no shootin'scrape, Starling. 'Tis not good for a roomin' house run by a lone woman."

"Mebbe I'd better wait till mornin'," Red said. "I could follow him outside and down the street."

"Now, that is a man's talk. Not too many men treat me like I deserve to be treated. You go as far as you like, Red Starling! If you have to use your gun to pertect yourself, hop right to it. I wouldn't have anything happen to you for worlds, because I know Sue Brinnon is a fine girl and ought to have her happiness. Go on down the hall."

As Red hesitated, she rose and opened a drawer in a centre table. From the drawer she took a thirty-eight calibre gun.

"Don't worry none about me," she said. "You just leave the door to the hall open. I'll stand back where that man can't see me. If he should do anything to you an' try to run away, he won't get by that door."

"I don't want to make trouble for you," Red said.

"I know it, darlin'. That's why I'm goin' to help you if I have to. This is my roomin' house. I don't aim to have no killers in it. Go on about the business in hand."

"Will that fella have his door locked if he's in his room?" Red asked.

"I dunno what he'd lock it with. He might have a chair against it or even the bureau. I don't furnish no keys. I like to have things wide open."

Red opened the door to the hall. It was dark and he moved along it a little way. No light showed below any door. He went on and came to the door which Mrs. Kerry had designated. He stood before the door for a while, but he heard no sound from within. Felt might be a snorer or he might be a quiet sleeper. Sometime in the night he would turn on the bed, but he might not be doing that just now.

The only thing which Red could think of to do was to try to enter the room. He put his finger on the latch and pressed. Slowly he started to push the door open. No object was against it. It gave way easily, and Red stepped into the room.

In addition to his liking for a clean face, Felt must like fresh air. The one window in the room was wide open. The bed had not been slept in recently. It had, Red guessed, been tidily made by Mrs. Kerry sometime that day.

He examined the bureau drawers but found nothing in them. Felt undoubtedly had a saddle roll, but he had not brought it here. So Red returned to the parlour. Mrs. Kerry was standing in the doorway with her gun in her hand. "Not there," Red reported.

"He'll be here before long," she said. "He won't stay out all night, 'tain't likely. Close the door, boy, and put out the light. We'll just wait for that scamp."

"I don't want you to lose your sleep," Red said.

"Never mind about that. I've lost many's the night's sleep before this."

Red closed the door till there was only a half-inch crack between the edge of it and the casing. That little crack would enable him to hear Felt if Felt came in. He drew down the hanging lamp on its chains and put out the light. Mrs. Kerry resumed her place on the sofa and Red sat in the chair.

Before an hour had passed Red had much trouble in keeping awake. He told Mrs. Kerry that he would have to move about quietly.

"Go ahead," she said. "You ought to be glad you get sleepy. You're young an' healthy. I'm gettin' along in years. I lay awake a good part of the time. If you want to, you can

take a nap in the chair. I'll let you know if your man comes."

"No naps," Red said.

"Yeh, I know. You cowmen an' punchers don't let a woman do your work for you."

"Ain't that right ?"

"I s'pose. But I've worked for men for years, ever since my husband died, an' I opened this roomin' house."

Red began to move about the room quietly. Still sleep struck at him. He was used to going to bed with the birds except on the nights when he met Sue.

But suddenly he came wide awake.

The outer door had been opened. Someone entered. A man. He whistled rather loudly as he passed the door to his room. Red and Mrs. Kerry heard him slam the door to his bedroom.

"Makin' plenty noise, so I'll know when he come in," Mrs. Kerry said. "He's a crook all right, Red. Let's go get him."

"No, Mrs. Kerry, you can't go, and I'll give him time to crawl into bed. He might have a gun too handy if I rushed him now."

"You got a good head. You're doin' it the right way, but I'll have you to understand I ain't afraid of him or any other crim'nal. They're a lot o' bums."

"But dangerous sometimes."

"Don't you want me to call the town marshal ?" she asked.

"Too old."

"The justice of the peace, then. He's a young man, new to the job. Warren had him put into the office. He didn't like the way the old justice was doin' business."

"Don't call anybody," Red said. "I can handle this man."

"I b'l'eve you can, at that."

"I'll give him ten minutes. By the way, what name did he give you ?"

"Shucks, none, an' I didn't ask him. Too many come an' go to be asked their names."

"His name is Felt," Red informed her. "At least that's the name he come down here under."

"I'll remember that," said Mrs. Kerry. "If necessary, I'll swear he tol' me that was his name."

"That'd be perjury," Red smiled in the dark.

"A small matter when it's in a good cause."

At the end of the ten minutes Red made his way slowly along the hall and again stopped in front of Felt's door. Again he listened, but there was an utter absence of sound. Well, the fellow had had time to get into bed.

He might not, however, be asleep, and Red pushed down the latch carefully. The door gave to his push, and it was plain that Felt had not been afraid that anyone would try to enter his room.

At length Red had the door sufficiently wide to permit him to enter the room, and he entered swiftly. He looked at the bed. Felt was not in it. The window was still wide open.

For a moment Red stood in the room in shocked astonishment. He had expected to capture Felt, but the man had only visited his rooms, probably to establish an alibi. His noisy entrance, his whistling, his slamming of his door all indicated that.

Red went quickly back to Mrs. Kerry and informed her of Felt's leave-taking.

" He's up to some crookedness tonight," she said, and analyzed Felt's actions as Red had done.

" Well, I've got to roam the town," Red said. " I've got to find that fella if I can."

" He may have men with him," Mrs. Kerry pointed out

" I'll have to take the chance."

" You won't take no help ? "

" Can't."

" Well, you wait a minute. My husband left a two-gun belt and a coupla guns. I'll get the belt and one of the guns. An extra gun may come in handy."

She went into the room out of which she had come upon Red's arrival and returned with the gun and the belt. Red removed his own belt and put on the other. He put his gun and the extra gun into the holsters.

" Watch yourself, boy," Mrs. Kerry said as he left.

The saloons were still open, and Red guessed he might as well visit them first. Felt might be in one of them. So far as he knew, he was totally unknown in the town, and might believe that he could come and go as he pleased.

He failed to find Felt in any of the places. He emerged from the last and walked down the street, deciding to patrol till something developed. As he came opposite the rooming house, he decided to have a look inside the stable. There wasn't a horse in it. He guessed that Mrs. Kerry had had little business, if any, that night.

Coming out into the street again, he started toward the end at which Warren lived.

He was some little distance from the banker's house when he saw two horses spurred into the middle of the road. They were again spurred, and the two riders bent in their saddles.

They sped away along the road, out of Red's sight. Fearing they had come from the banker's house, Red ran to the front door. It was partly open. He pushed it ajar and went into the room in which he had talked to Warren.

Warren lay on the floor in the middle of the room.

CHAPTER XII

Mob Menace

Red dropped to his knees beside Warren. Warren, he quickly discovered, was dead. He had not been shot. His head had been crushed in by a gun barrel, and Red was sure that he had been struck more than once. His wounds were terrible.

Red slowly rose. He passed a hand over his eyes, and he felt a little dizzy. When he recovered, he began to try to think things out. Those two men who had fled in the night had undoubtedly murdered Warren. He hadn't been mixed up in the jam, but he had paid. Red was convinced that one of those men had been Felt. Felt had noisily returned to his room and then had left it by the way of the window. He had been met by someone else and those two had been admitted to Warren's home by Warren himself.

The murder, Red saw, could not have been hooked up to the matter of the five thousand dollars. Warren had had no knowledge of that. Red couldn't figure it out.

He guessed he had better get into touch with the law now to enlist the aid of the law so far as Warren was concerned. The law would step in anyhow. He went into the street, carefully closing the door behind him.

He chose the young justice of the peace, as against the old town marshal. Since Warren had picked that young justice, he must be a good man. From having seen the sign on the window, he knew where the justice's office was, and he went there at once. As he had feared, the place was dark and the door was locked. He thought it barely possible that the justice slept in a back room, for, unless he were married, he would hardly have established a home.

Red pounded on the door but got no answer. The night was wearing on now, and the saloons were beginning to disgorge their customers. Half a dozen men came along the walk in Red's direction. Seeing him standing there, in a kind of helplessness, they stopped. Two of them, Red saw, were under the influence of whisky, and the others had been drinking.

" You lookin' for the J.P., fella ? " one of the drunken ones asked.

" Yes. Do you know where he lives ?"

" Why, he sleeps right in there, but I reckon he ain't there now. I've seen him goin' about town all night."

" Know where he is now ? "

" No, I don't."

The group in front of the justice's office attracted other men emerging from the saloons, as a pile of sugar would have

attracted flies. Soon there were some fifty men beyond Red, overflowing from the walk into the street.

"What's happened, fella?" a man on the outskirts of the crowd asked. "Watcha lookin' for the law for?"

"That's my business," Red snapped. "He'll be comin' along pretty soon, I guess. He won't stay up till daylight."

"Oh, its your business, huh?"

The question was angrily put. A majority of these men were befuddled, and in that condition they guessed they knew what their rights were in their own town. Those nearest Red edged still closer, and those behind followed in.

"If a crime has been committed in this man's town, you'll tell us about it," a man demanded.

"I'll tell the justice."

"Oh, so there has been a crime, huh? What was it? Answer me, cowboy, or——"

Those were all townsmen, and Red drew both his guns and swept them over the crowd. He was sure that none of them was armed. They fell back a little, but another man called: "You can't get away with it, fella. Put up them guns."

"Not me!"

"By thunder, I b'l'eve you've committed a crime your own self," the man declared.

The crowd stirred. A murmur ran from lip to lip. Red was afraid the men would attack. He would not dare shoot. He might easily be lynched. There was little reason in those whisky-inflamed brains.

"What's goin' on here?"

That question was put by a young, powerfully built man who came from alongside the building.

"We don't know yet," one of the men replied, "but we aim to find out."

"Stand aside," said the young man. "Let me pass. I'm in charge. You fellas run along home. You're all drunk or half drunk."

The crowd fell back to make way for him. He walked up to Red's side.

"You're Starling, ain't you?" the man asked.

"Why, yes. How'd you know me? You the justice?"

"That's me. Never mind how I knew you. Let's get inside."

He inserted a key and unlocked the door. Then he turned to the crowd.

Red saw that he had a gun in each hand now. He had had one in his left one and had drawn another with his right.

"You fellas leavin'?" he demanded.

"No, sir!" a man bawled. "The perceedings in your shop is public. We're the public. You can't keep us out."

The justice threw open the door and told Red to step inside and light a lamp he would find on the table behind which the

justice usually sat. Red had no sooner made the light than there was a commotion outside. He ran back to the door and gained the justice's side.

"Put your guns on 'em," the justice said.

He and Red covered the crowd. Red had an idea that this was the damnedest justice of the peace in the world.

The men under the peril from the four guns stood in silence for a moment.

"A dozen o' you fellas can come in," he said. "The rest can stay outside. To hell with you bein' the public. This is my shop. I run the business in it as I damn please. Get that?"

"You're ridin' a high horse, fella. You won't be elected when election time rolls around."

"To hell with that, too. What do I care? If I had to depend upon a bunch o' swine to elect me, I wouldn't want the job."

"You callin' us swine?" a man demanded.

"You been up to the whisky trough all night. What dozen is comin' in?"

They all wanted to come in, but in the end a dozen asserted themselves over the others, and Red guessed they were men of more substance than the rest. He hoped so, for the justice seemed to be his friend.

"When me an' this man gets inside, you twelve come in," the justice said. "The last man will lock the door. If anybody tries to break in here, I'll blast him. You mind what I'm tellin' you."

"Watcha gonna do?" a man cried. "Have a hearin'?"

"A hearin' on what?"

"I dunno."

The crowd found some relief from humiliation in laughter, but it was not merry laughter.

The justice and Red went inside and stood behind the table with their guns in their hands. The twelve men came in, the last locking the door.

"Take off your hats," the young justice ordered, and they, rather sheepishly, removed their hats.

"What's happened?" the justice asked Red.

Red looked over the twelve men. In here, under the light, they seemed to have become tame. They shifted their gaze from Red to the justice and then to the floor.

Red turned to the justice and said quietly: "I found Warren murdered in his home."

Warren having been a cowman and a fighting man was highly regarded in the community. He had favoured some of the men in this room, even loaning them small sums out of his own pocket when they had insufficient security. The effect of Red's disclosure was to stun them all.

"Who murdered him?" a man managed to get out.

"I——" Red began.

" Just a minute, Starling," the justice broke in. " You men, do you think Red Starling had anything to do with this ? "

" He found Warren's body," a man said.

His tone was serious. None of these men were drunk, and what they had imbibed seemed to be losing its effect. The shock of Warren being murdered had had a sobering result.

" We'll go down to Warren's house," said the justice.

" We'll see that nobody interferes," one man said.

" You can mind your own business," the justice snapped. " Me and Starling can handle that bunch outside."

The justice ordered the men to go outside ahead of him and Red. They stood apart from the rest of the crowd. There was a commotion in that crowd, and two men pushed their way through till they stood in front of Red and the justice.

" That's the fella," one man said.

" What about him ? " the justice asked.

Red recognized the two men. They were those who had come up to him before he had entered Warren's house.

" Warren's dead, ain't he ? " the man inquired.

" If you been with the crowd for ten seconds, you know it. What about this man ? Get goin' ! I'm busy."

" We seen him in front of Warren's house not long before Warren was killed."

Though the justice seemed favourably inclined toward Red, Red knew that he would weigh all evidence. It was odd to see a man like him holding down a job usually held down by old men. However, he would have to do his duty, whatever his inclinations were. Red prepared to defend himself. This mob would never put a rope around his neck.

Red watched the justice out of the corner of his eye. He thought the young man was acting strangely. That man's assertions appeared to have had no effect on him.

" Get outa the way," he ordered.

" You got somethin' there," a man safely in the rear of the other called. " Ask that cowpuncher what he was doin' in front of Warren's house."

" Whoever said that can start for home," said the justice, " Pronto ! "

The justice seemed to have a friend or two out there. A scuffle began. Eventually a man was forced out into the road.

" Go on an' don't come back," the justice told him. " Hole up for the night."

The man went along the road. The justice addressed the crowd : " Me an' Starling an' the men who was inside with us is goin' down to Warren's. The rest o' you can tag along if you wanta, but you remain outside. Now, move along."

The crowd apparently had no intention of arguing with the law, since the law might be enforced by four guns. They started rapidly in the direction of Warren's house.

" You twelve is a kind of jury," the justice explained. " You

can't start nothin' 'less you wanta land in the town jail, an', as you know, the town jail ain't no place for white men."

"We'll lope along with you till we see what's what," said one of the twelve.

The crowd was in the middle of the road when the other men arrived. As they went into the house, the crowd came up close to the front door.

In the room where Warren lay, the justice and Red picked up the body and bore it into a bedroom and placed it on the bed. The justice examined the wound. Then he and Red went into the living room.

"Warren was beaten to death with a gun bar'l," the justice announced. "Anybody wanta ask any questions?"

"Starling," a man asked, "what was you doin' here earlier in the night?"

"Havin' a business talk with Warren."

"What kind of a business talk?"

"I ain't sayin'."

"Oh, you ain't! Well, was the business talk quiet an' peaceable?"

"Certainly!"

"An' you won't tell about it?"

"No!"

"I guess that's all, Mr. Justice," the man sneered. "Nights Warren is here alone. He's got a man that comes in daytimes. This fella could easy have come back. Say, you, was you tryin' to borrow money from Warren?"

"Hell, no!" Red snorted. "I got money in his bank."

"How much?"

"Around a thousand dollars. I own my outfit. I don't need no money from nobody."

"You men got any witnesses?" the justice mildly asked.

"Why, no!"

"I got one."

"You got one?" the man asked. "You mean this fella Starling?"

"No. I mean myself."

A sigh of relief issued from Red's lips. He guessed he knew when a man had an ace in the hole. The twelve men only stared. The justice lifted his right hand and said: "I swear to tell the truth, the hull damn truth, an' nothin' but the truth, an' I'll blow the daylights outa any man that doubts me. You got that straight, you men?"

"Reckon so," the speaker said.

"I seen Warren after this boy visited him earlier," the justice proceeded. "Warren hunted me up. He tol' me that Starling was in a jam an' asked me to look out for him. Warren was afraid that Starling would be jumped by more'n one man. Warren says to me: 'Starling is as square as they

come. I don't want anything to happen to him. He's one man that hasn't ever come to me with his hat in his hand. He stands on his own feet. He's gonna marry——' "

" You don't have to speak of that," Red sharply interrupted.

" That's a fact," the justice admitted. " 'Scuse me. I guess we won't drag no girl into this. Well, the upshot of it all was that I prowled the town. I seen Starling go into Mrs. Kerry's. I thought he was goin' to bed an' I begun to prowl the town again, lookin' for strangers. I didn't find none. What I'm tryin' to get acrost to you is that Starling wasn't trying to borrow money and that Warren was his friend. You all know that Warren was my friend too. Any of you think that Warren lied ? "

" Course not ! "

" Any of you think I just been lyin' ? "

" No. You allus been square."

" I reckon that's all," said the justice, " 'less you got some information, Starling."

" I got some—for your private ear," Red said.

" Why ain't you got it for us ? " that speaker asked.

" It ain't a thing to be spread far and wide. It's somethin' that concerns me alone."

" What's your verdict, men ? " the justice asked.

" Verdict ? "

" Shore ! You're a jury."

" What kind of a verdict is returned in a case like this ? "

" Why, that Warren met his death at the hands of a man or men unknown."

" All right ! " The speaker seemed to want now to get away from the house of death. " That's the verdict, ain't it men ? "

The men murmured and the justice nodded in acceptance of the verdict. He commented : " Mebbe this ain't all been legal. I dunno. I ain't a lawyer. But it's been fittin'. Now, I may have business out of town. You, the fella that's been so ready with his mouth, pick a coupla men an' stay here the rest of the night with Warren's body. Tomorrow see that he gets a man's funeral. You hear me ? "

Again there was that murmur, and Red and the justice went outside, followed by nine of the men. The crowd had pressed in. The justice stood on the step and said : " Get to hell away from here. Go home. Nothin' doin' yet in the Warren matter. Them men found Starling not guilty. *I* know he ain't guilty. Get away, pronto ! "

The men who had come out of the house managed to step into the crowd, and there were whisperings. Presently the entire crowd dispersed, leaving the justice and Red alone.

" You got anything to tell me, Starling ? " the justice asked. " I'm what law there is, y'know. The town marshal is sleepin' by now. He won't be stirrin' till late tomorrow mornin'."

" I'll tell you this," said Red : " I'm much obliged to you."

" You can thank Warren. He was the squarest man ever I met. He was my friend in more ways than one. I oughta share in runnin' down the men that killed him."

Red already learned that the justice was a square-shooter. He knew how to handle things, too. He had waited till the proper moment to tell what he knew. He was physically fit. He was, in short, the kind of man Red could tie to.

Red decided that if he continued on his own, since a murder had been committed, he would be doing so out of false pride. Pride had no place here now. He said evenly : " I was near Warren's house just before he was killed. I seen two men ride away hell-bent. One of them, I b'l'eve, is Felt. He was stoppin' at Mrs. Kerry's. I let him slip from under my hand. Hell, I'll tell you all about it." He told the justice the story in detail.

" Them two didn't go to Warren to get the five thousand, because Warren didn't have it," said the justice. " They was playin' some other game."

" That's plain enough," Red said.

" You gonna lemme ride with you to help you find them two?" the justice asked.

" Can you leave your office ?"

" To hell with it. I ain't stuck on the job. I just took it to please Warren, and now he's gone. If he was here, he'd tell me to ride with you. He tol' me to give you a hand here in town, y'know."

Red thought that over carefully. Then he said : " You're my man. You can stay in this thing long as you wanta."

" You don't do things by halves, do you ?" the justice said. " My name is Ed."

CHAPTER XIII

Trailers

The night was almost gone as the two men rode in the direction which the murderers had taken. They rode slowly for two miles. For the first mile Red slept in his saddle and Ed for the second mile. That little sleep refreshed them.

" Those two will have to have food," Red said.

Ed rode thoughtfully for a while. Then he said : " I know this country like a book. Them two will have to have food and water. Will you follow me for a while ?"

" Shore thing !"

They rode for ten miles and were then facing the coming day. Ed turned off, and Red, instead of following him, rode by his side. They presently came to hills. Ed turned along these. A waterfall, with a pool at the bottom and a creek

flowing sideways in each direction, came into view. Ed continued along the creek. Presently Red saw a cabin ahead of him.

" Fella that lives there has got a few sheep an' does some prospectin'," Ed explained. " Mebbe them two knew about this place. We oughta be in time to catch the man before he starts herdin' his sheep."

They rode up to the door of the cabin and found it closed. Ed pounded on it but got no response.

" Shucks," Ed said, " he musta got an early start. May be with his sheep. May be pannin' along the creek. He ain't never found no gold, but they never give up, them fellas. Well, I'm hungry. We can go in and make some coffee an' borrow a bite. The fella's a good ol' scout. He won't mind. He ain't no cowman, so we can leave a dollar on the table. He can use it for more food."

Ed opened the door and Red came up behind him. They stood frozen to the threshold.

The old sheepherder was dead on the floor, too. There was a stain on his night clothing. In this isolated place, he had not been beaten to death. He had been shot.

" I reckon they been here," Red said.

He and Ed advanced into the room. They examined the sheepherder's wound and guessed that the bullet had either struck the heart or had come close to striking it.

" We better look around," Red said.

Opposite the two men was a drapery made from old sacks. The sacks had been cut open and the cloth loosely sewed together. Red advanced to this and drew it aside. Perhaps two dozen cans of food were on a shelf behind the drapery. They were in a row at the back. Red ran a finger over the space in front of the cans. The tip was dark from dust when he examined it. Lighting a match, he looked more closely at that space. He made out round spots on which cans had undoubtedly rested recently. Counting he discovered that two dozen cans had been taken. He called Ed's attention to it all, and they agreed that the two killers had been here and had taken food. Ruthlessly they had killed a protesting, innocent old man.

" We're up against the real thing in killers, Red," Ed stated.

" There's no law that prevents the killin' of a killer, is there ?" Red asked.

" Not a law. If there was, it wouldn't be no good."

They hunted through the two-room cabin but found nothing more. It appeared that the men had come for food and had been taking it when the sheepherder came from his bedroom. One bullet had sufficed to silence the sheepherder forever.

" We better lay the old man away," Ed said.

They buried him quickly on a hillside.

" Them men would take to the creek," Ed said. " Lucky

for us it don't run far. It drops off into the sand about a mile from here." They went along the creek bank and found where the men had entered the water.

"I've never been over here," Red said. "Are there trees all along like there are opposite us?"

"Almost all the way. They stop about two hundred feet from where the water disappears."

"We better cross the creek and get beyond the trees," Red said. "One of them fellas will be watchin' all the time, but he won't expect anybody to be on the other side between the hills and the trees."

They crossed over but found no trail. It seemed that whoever travelled this way—and travel was light—remained on the other side of the creek. The two men rode for about three-quarters of a mile, fully screened. Then they dismounted and secured their horses and went on afoot. Red saw that Ed was counting his paces and Red remained silent.

"If they stayed by water, they ain't far off," Ed said. "We gotta go on like mice that ain't even nibblin'."

They required some time to negotiate the little distance that remained. Ed stopped then and Red stopped by his side. Ed leaned and said: "I b'l'eve they're at the very end of the trees. That'd give them a chance to look back and ahead and over toward the hills. I reckon we can be sure they ain't lookin' this way. Let's take about twenty more steps. An' boy, if you make a noise!" They made no noise and soon they were standing still again.

"Hey, Felt, come on," a voice called. "If you want somethin' more to eat, yuh better have it now—an' a drink. We gotta get some sleep. I'm dead."

There was the sound of some one passing carelessly through the trees. Red held his breath. That man might take it into his head to look out on this side. Ed seemed to entertain that thought, too. Both he and Red lifted their guns.

Red had hoped that Considine had been the other man with Felt, but the voice which had summoned Felt had not been the voice of Considine.

No one looked out to catch sight of the two men in the open. There was silence for a while and then one of them said: "Who sleeps first?"

"You can, Felt. I'm all right."

That disclosed one fact. Felt was the stronger man of the two. The other fellow was deferring to him.

"All right," Felt said. "You get out an' watch. Here I go into the deepest sleep ever you seen. Gosh, am I tired?"

Ed and Red looked at each other and Red jerked a hand toward the trees, and Ed nodded. Ed would take the man on watch, leaving Felt to Red.

In utter weariness Felt must have lain down on his back, for his snores presently came faintly to the two watchers.

"Had I better get Felt first?" Red asked.

"Better lemme get that fella outside. I won't bungle the job. Felt's asleep. If you put a gun on him, he might wake up and alarm that fella out there."

"Looks like fifty-fifty," Red said. "Go ahead!"

As Red had done when he had knocked out Considine, Ed had to edge his way through the trees. Red heard no sound from him and knew that the other man could hear none. Minutes passed slowly. Then there was a slight hissing sound from Ed. No other sound followed, and Red knew that that hisssing had been a signal to himself and to the other man. That other man had been held up, and he was too frightened to warn Felt.

Red went forward till he was opposite the spot from which the voices had come. He edged in through the trees and came upon Felt, lying between two trees. His mouth was open as he slept profoundly. His position between the trees was such as that he could not roll over. He would have to rise straight up if he got to his feet at all. His gun was still in its holster. Red stood at his feet and pointed a gun at him. When he awoke, he would be helpless, even though he went for his gun.

Red was sure he was Felt, for he answered the description given Red.

"All right, Ed," Red called. "Bring that sucker in here."

Felt was not aroused by the call. He did not stir. Ed brought the other man through the trees. He was a sort of duplicate of Molliter, in that he carried excess weight and had a stupid face.

"What a killer you are!" Red scorned.

"I ain't killed nobody," the man said.

"Meanin' nobody has been killed?"

The man stared at the ground. As was usual with men of his breed, he was considering his own peril.

"I didn't kill nobody," he repeated.

"We'll see what Felt has to say."

Red moved alongside Felt till he stood between Felt's feet and his knees. He lifted a foot to kick Felt awake.

"Wait!" the other man begged. "I'll tell you."

"Shoot it!"

"Well, me an' Felt was quittin' Walters. You know who Walters is?" Red nodded and the man proceeded: "Felt had five thousand dollars in his kick. That money wasn't gonna be paid to Considine. You know Considine?" Again Red nodded, and the man asked: "An' Molliter and Blinky?" Red nodded for a third time. "It was all a bluff about them two an' about Considine. Walters was through with that redhead. He sent Molliter and Blinky down here to see what Considine was doin'. They was to be strangers an' when Brinnon was killed, they was to go straight to the law an' say they seen

Considine do it. That was the on'y way Felt would take on the job."

" You killed Warren an' the sheepherder," Red declared.

" My Gawd, no ! Take a good look at me an' you can see I ain't no killer in cold blood."

" You went to Warren's with Felt ?"

" I done that. It was Felt's idea. He said there wasn't no use in us leavin' the country with on'y five thousan' dollars. He said we might as well clean out the bank. We was gonna make Warren open it up for us. Then Felt was gonna get rid of him. Warren was tough. He said he wouldn't open no bank. He wouldn't do nothin'. He cussed Felt somethin' awful. Felt got mad an' went behind him an' hit him with his gun bar'l. Warren went down like a tree fallin'.

" Felt bent over him an' said : ' My Gawd, I hit him too hard. I guess I broke his skull. We gotta get outa here.'

" Before we got out, Felt hit Warren three more times. He said he hadda make sure of the job. Warren might come to for a while an' squeal. We got outa there an' Felt led me right to the sheepherder's cabin. He knowed exac'ly where it was. The ol' man was whittlin' a stick to start the fire. We busted in on him just as he was puttin' the lid back on the stove. Account the smoke I guess he was gonna light the fire through the front draft. He was a cusser, too, an' he refused to give us food an' Felt let him have it. We took food an' got outa there an' come here. You can see from them empty cans that we et an' had food left. I ain't done nothin', mister."

" Not a thing," said Ed. " You was on'y with a killer when he killed an' you stayed with him till he killed again. No ! You ain't done nothin'. Keep still now. We'll give Felt a surprise party."

Red kicked Felt hard in the leg and Felt opened his eyes. Red kicked him again. Felt yelled.

" A little pain ain't so good, is it, killer ?" Red scornfully said.

Felt, confused, dropped his hand to his gun butt. Red said : " Go right ahead. You can see I got a gun on you."

Felt snatched the hand away and Red leaned and took the gun and tossed it among the trees.

" Get to your feet, Felt," Red ordered.

Felt sat up, took hold of a tree trunk, and dragged himself up. Red was within easy striking distance of him, and he smashed him on the mouth. Felt fell against one of the trees and slid down it to the ground. He was not in a position to drop full length. With his back to the tree trunk, he sat there. He opened his mouth and spat out two teeth.

" You won't be so pretty from now on as you thought you was," Red told him.

Felt looked at him dazedly and managed to ask : " Whatcha think you're doin' to me ?"

' Get up !"

Felt dragged himself up by the trunk again. He shielded his face with his forearms.

"Don't hit me again," he said.

"Killer, Ed," Red scorned.

"Yeh," Ed jeered.

"I ain't killed nobody," said Felt weakly.

"Turn your back to me," Red said.

Felt quickly turned his back and Red searched his clothing. He found a package of bills of large denomination. He handed it to Ed and Ed stowed it away.

"Come around, fella," said Red, and Felt turned.

"Where'd you get the money?" Red demanded.

"Earned it."

Red doubled his fist, swung it. Felt blabbed: "Walters give it to me."

"To kill Brinnon?"

"I wasn't gonna kill Brinnon. Me an' this poor fool was gettin' outa the country."

"You killed Warren."

"I didn't——"

Red stepped back and levelled his gun at Felt's heart. He said icily: "Two seconds."

"Warren cussed me. I got mad. I hit him. I didn't mean to kill him."

"You didn't mean to kill him when you hit him again?"

"That rotten pup there has been squealin'!" Felt cried.

"Shore I have," the other man said. "I didn't kill nobody."

"You killed that old man in his cabin out o' hand, Felt."

"He got tough."

"You kill everybody that gets tough?"

"I don't let nobody call me names like them two called me."

"What'll we do with them, Ed?" Red asked.

"I'm a puncher," Ed answered. "I left a job on Warren's ranch to take this J.P. job. Warren has a son that I gotta get word to. . . . Lemme think."

He thought for a considerable time. Red knew what was troubling him. He was still a representative of the law, and he didn't want to be a representative of the law. Suddenly he beamed.

"Why," he said, "I quit. Warren ain't no more. He was the man I was responsible to. Herewith is my resignation, whoever gives a damn . . . Red, you're the boss. Whatcha wanta do with these two?"

"Oh, one question to Felt," Red said. "Fella, how many more men has Walters got down here?"

"Sev'rul."

"Where are they? With Considine?"

"Considine? I ain't seen that four-flusher. Don't even know him. No, they ain't with him."

"Where are they?"

"You're a trailer. You can go find them."

Red might have knocked Felt cold, but he refrained. He wanted to get this business over with. He merely pointed his gun at Felt again.

"Where?" he asked quietly.

"I was to meet them over by Brinnon's, along Juniper Creek. I give that up. I was on my way out, I tell you."

"When was you to meet them?"

"When I got there. They're holed up at the head of the creek. That's the way I do business. I don't tell no man *when* I'll meet him. Too dangerous."

"Clever, ain't you? Well, where's your horses?"

"In among the trees, down the creek a ways."

"I guess I'll go get a rope," Ed said.

"Mebbe you better keep outa this, Ed," Red said.

"Keep outa it? Why, this here Felt killed the best friend ever I had or will likely ever have. If I was alone, I'd string him up."

"You can't do that!" Felt cried.

Ed gave him a disdainful look and told Red: "Keep your gun on the two of 'em. I'll be back in a few minutes. You, line up there with Felt."

"But I didn't kill nobody," the second man protested.

Ed ingored that, and when Felt and the second man stood side by side, menaced by Red's gun, Ed left. He was back in a few minutes, his rope in his hand.

"Give us a chance, men," Felt begged, but the other man was too terrified to speak.

"Same chance you give them two men," Ed said hardily. "Step out here, Felt."

Felt staggered up to Ed as if he found it impossible to disobey, though it should have occurred to him that nothing worse than Ed intended could happen to him. Ed put the loop over his head and tightened it about his neck. In a brief time Red and Ed considered two dangling figures

"Two that'll kill no more," Ed commented. "What now Red?"

"What you want to do?"

"I gotta get over to Warren's ranch before long. Warren's son'll have to know. Gosh, we shouldn't have had Warren buried in town. We should have took his body to his ranch."

"The body can be moved at any time," Red pointed out.

"Yeh, that's right. Well, mebbe the Warren boy can wait for a while. Them two fellas is still at the head of Juniper Creek. You was goin' over there by yourself, Red?"

"O' course."

"I'll go with you."

They got their horses and set off. They would not eat any

of the food which the two crooks had stolen. It seemed to them like tainted stuff, but they drank from the creek.

" Where'll we hit this Juniper Creek ?" Ed asked.

" We'll go by the road. There's plenty trees along the creek. We can take them two by surprise, I'm thinkin'."

They arrived at the bridge over the stream and followed the trees till they came to where Red had knocked out Considine. Red examined the sign which Considine had left and could make out that the man had sent his horse into the water when he had revived.

" You think this here Considine is mixed up with them two we're after ?" Ed asked.

" No. I think Felt and the man with him and these two was leavin' Considine out in the cold, no matter what happened, leavin' Blinky and Molliter out, too."

" Yeh," Ed agreed.

They were soon approaching the headwaters of the creek.

CHAPTER XIV

Running Water

They dismounted, led their horses among the trees, and went forward on foot along the fringe away from the creek. They did not think the men would be among the trees, but they proceeded cautiously. At first the sound which the creek made resulted merely from a ripple, but Red whispered to Ed that the sound would soon increase.

It did that. The sound had sufficient volume to make it impossible for them to be heard, but it also made it impossible for them to hear any sounds others might make. It was all a question now as to whether the two men would be on their guard. " We can hunt among the trees, Ed," Red said. "The noise will let us move fast."

They went in among the trees and walked back and forth among them but found nothing. There were no hoof prints or footprints, not a broken or twisted branch.

" We didn't see no sign where the ground was soft," Ed said. " Them fellas must have rode far out on this side or some place on the other side."

Red looked about at the trees. He recognized the necessity of crossing the creek, but he didn't want to go back to get his horse ; and he didn't want to get his boots wet, for they would harden and tighten.

He picked out a tree with a long limb. Pulling down the limb he carried it back as far as it would go without cracking. Then he took a few swift steps and swung himself across the creek by hanging to the branch. He alighted on his feet but

lost his balance and fell against a tree, making a good deal of noise.

Listening himself, Red looked across at Ed. Ed was listening, but he soon shook his head, indicating that he heard nothing unusual. Red was grateful for the sound the water made. That was caused by its issuing from a canyon which sloped up into the hills.

Passing through the trees on his side, Red examined the ground. He saw where two horses had recently been ridden. Their prints were plain in the soft ground. He went along a little way, keeping close to the trees and came upon two cigarette butts. These men must have arrived here in darkness, but they had been careless enough to smoke. Red guessed they thought themselves secure.

Then it dawned on him that they might be passing themselves off as punchers, seeking jobs. They might have gone to Brinnon's. Well, there was nothing to worry about in that. They would be taken care of at Brinnon's. All strangers would be suspected by the old man and his punchers.

Red returned to the spot at which he had emerged, went through the trees, and beckoned to Ed to swing over to him. When Ed was at his side, he told him what he had found.

" Does the creek fill the canyon ?" Ed asked.

" Oh, no, the canyon is a good fifty feet wide. I ain't never seen the creek more'n ten feet wide. Right now I'd say it'd be about eight feet. It'll dwindle till the fall rains come."

" I don't b'l'eve them two would leave the water, 'less they did go over to Brinnon's," Ed said. ' Likely they're camped out some place in that canyon."

" I'd like to get them two alive," said Red. " Think it'd be possible ?"

" We could make a stab at it, but we don't wanta take any chances."

" How fast are you with a gun ?" Red asked.

" I'm pretty fair. Can hold my own."

Red knew that he was pretty fair, and Red said : " We could take a coupla sticks an' go along the creek like we was measurin' the depth of the water, to see what the chances of the creek's goin' dry was."

" We might come right under them fellas' guns," said Ed.

" Yeah, an' them two might take me for Considine, like Molliter an' Blinky done. You think they'd shoot Considine on sight ?"

" I b'l'eve the chances would be twenty to one against that. They'd wanta talk to that fella for a few minutes anyways. Mebbe they might plan to use him. You think they know you ?"

" Dunno. Molliter and Blinky made a mistake about me. Tell you what we'll do. I'll go along, measurin' the water.

You keep me in sight. If anything happens to me, you'll know what to do. I fooled Molliter and Blinky. I'm sure I can fool them two."

"It's risky, Red."

"Oh, not very, I guess. It's the on'y thing I can see, the safest thing."

"Go ahead, then, I won't be far behind you."

Red pushed his hat to the back of his head and started toward the canyon. Halfway to the mouth he stopped and tore a stout branch from a tree. Every five steps he measured the water.

Before long he came to the mouth of the canyon and stepped into it, continuing his measuring. Now he held the stick up every time he withdrew it from the water as if he measured the depth of the wet mark.

The hills here were ragged, and he knew that there were breaks in them all along. Any one of the breaks might conceal those two men.

He came to the first break and passed it safely. When he came opposite the second break, he plunged the stick into the water and held it up with one hand while with the other he seemed to measure one foot at a time. Then he stood looking straight along the rising stream.

He had not looked into the break, but he felt that someone was in there. So he plunged the stick into the water again and moved it about. Once more he withdrew it and measured the wet length.

His back was to the break, and behind him someone asked: "Plenty water still, ain't there, neighbour?"

Red did not start, for he had been expecting just such a development. He was cheered, however, by the fact that the man's voice disclosed that he was not moved. In fact he seemed to want to assure Red that he was interested only in what Red was doing. With a last glance at the stick, Red turned.

Two men were standing in the break. They were not sufficiently far out to look along the creek in Ed's direction. Red walked carelessly up to them, so that they should not come out. These at least were men who seemed to be punchers. They were small men, lean and hard. One smiled and the other fixed his eyes on Red in an inquiring stare.

"We'll have water for a while," Red said. "But you can't tell about this creek. She'll be runnin' good an' all of a sudden when she ain't being fed no more, the sand'll take her and you'll have a dry bottom. This creek is about all the water I got. I've had some tough times—would have had if old man Brinnon hadn't let me drive my herd over to his creeks."

"Where does Brinnon live?" the man asked, and his interest was great.

"Brinnon? My gosh, don't you know him? He's got more

damn cows an' owns an' controls more land an' water than any man oughta."

"Wonder he lets you have water."

"You think he lets me have it for nothin'? I sh'd say not."

"Your ranch near here?"

Red had been expecting that question and had prepared an answer. He was ready to put the whole business to the touch.

"Me?" he asked. "Why, I'm Singleton."

He was sure that that would mean no danger for the real Singleton, Brinnon's nearest neighbour. These two would not be interested in Singleton.

"Well," said the man, still smiling, "that don't mean nothin' to us. We're strangers. If you got a ranch, we might wanta hook up with you."

"Brinnon's would be the more likely place," the other man said.

Red dropped his eyes a little as if he were thinking over what the first man had said. However he could still see that first man. The man gave the other an angry glance, his smile disappearing. The man's mouth tightened and Red guessed he was shut up for the time being.

Red raised his head.

"I could take one o' you on if you're the kind that does what he's told," he said. "I fired one man this mornin'. I told him to come up here an' measure the water, an' damn if he didn't say the water was all right an' he wasn't plannin' to get his feet wet. I don't stand for that kind of talk. If a man works for me, he does what I tell him."

"One o' them hoity-toity fellas, huh," said the first man, smiling again. "You handled him just right. Course, when *I* work for a man, he's my boss."

"You'd have to tell me somethin' about yourself," Red said. "Just lemme finish this job. Take about a minute."

Red had learned a lot. These men didn't know him and they didn't know Considine. Walters had apparently placed everything in Felt's hands and had told Felt alone what there was to tell. Well, Felt was beyond giving anyone information now.

The two men offered no objection to Red's continuing his work, and Red believed that he was safe from their guns. One man would take the job after he had lied about himself, and the other would go along with him, since no cowman, except in circumstances developed in this country lately, would refuse food and shelter to a travelling puncher. If Red consented to his going, the two would be satisfied that Brinnon had told him nothing, if indeed Brinnon himself knew anything.

As Red started to move toward the creek bank, he heard a crackling sound. It was too loud to have come from a stepped-on twig, and Red believed that Ed had broken a large

branch in his hands to warn Red that he was coming in. Probably he had seen Red disappear into the break.

Red went close to the two men and said : " I bet that's that fella I fired. He's prob'ly doin' the job I tol' him to do." Red chuckled. " Just leave him to me. When I fire a man, he stays fired."

" We'll step back," one of the men said and they retreated some ten feet.

Ed came into view. He had a broken branch in his hand, and he was dropping it into the water. The broken end merely floated on the water. If Ed had known all that had happened, he could not have backed up Red more precisely.

" That's the way you measure water in a creek," Red called, and drew both his guns. Behind him he heard one of the men, the smiling one probably, giggle. " Stick up your hands, fella." Red ordered Ed.

Ed, aware of course that something had taken place unseen by him, started and cast away the stick. It floated off down the stream. For a moment he stood motionless and then he turned, his hands lifted only so that the elbows were crooked. Both hands were in a position to dart down to his guns. Ed looked at Red, and then his eyes went to the two men. Even the one who had not smiled before was smiling now.

" Why, I was doin' what you said," Ed stated.

Red was afraid he would call him " Starling " or " Red" and he frowned him into silence, and slowly walked up to him. He stepped to one side of him and put a gun against his ribs.

" Didn't I fire you, fella ?" he demanded.

" Why, yes, but I didn't think you meant it. I thought you was foolin' with me. I got goin' on this job soon's I could."

" When I fire a man, he stays fired. Now, draw them guns an' drop 'em quick !"

Ed stared as if stupidly at Red and did not immediately draw his guns. Red glanced at the two men. They were standing still, merely enjoying a scene in which either would have been glad to participate. Holding up a man whatever his ultimate fate was to be, was always good fun.

Red grinned at the two men and they grinned back. Everything was coming their way, their grins seemed to say. Red was going to drive this fellow off, and then there surely would be a vacancy on Red's ranch. That would be sweet. One man would be a working puncher and the other would be free, unwatched. That free man could watch for Felt and Felt's companion.

Red turned back to Ed. Red believed that he was safe now in whispering to Ed. Ed was disobeying him, and he could spit out a few words as if anger were keeping down his voice.

" Draw an' cover 'em," he said.

Ed dropped his hands to his gun butts, his eyes on the ground. As he had lowered them, he had located the two men

again. His guns came out slowly and he dropped both hands as if he were going to let go of the weapons. Red whirled, and Ed's hands came up. The two men found themselves covered by four guns.

The two froze. Their eyes popped and their mouths dropped open. Both Red and Ed disdained to issue a command. They would as lief shoot these two if they wanted a fight.

" W-why, Singleton," the man who had smiled first gasped, " w-what you tryin' to do to us ?"

No word from Red or Ed. Only those menacing guns, firmly held, steadily pointed. Both men lifted their hands slowly as if they had not energy enough to shoot them up.

Red jerked back his head and the men advanced toward him and Ed. Red moved one of his guns in a circle and the two turned their backs. Ed took their guns and cast them aside.

" You waitin' for Felt ?" Red asked.

" F-felt ?"

" No, just plain Felt. Him an' his sidekicker."

" I dunno what you're talkin' about, Singleton."

" Singleton ! I ain't Singleton. Where'd you get that idea ? I'm Red Starling. My ranch ain't on this creek."

" You said you was Singleton," the man whined.

" What you think of that, Ed ?" Red asked. " The fella is dreamin'."

Red put the tip of one gun against the back of the neck of the man who could smile when he thought a cruel act was to be perpetrated.

" You waitin' for Felt ?" he asked. " Me and my pardner hung Felt an' his sidekicker a while ago. Was you waitin' for him ?"

" Y-yes, Starling."

" You ain't never heard of me an' Red Considine ?"

" Your names wasn't never mentioned to us."

" That was an oversight on Walters' part. Where's Walters now ?"

" W-w——"

" Where is he ?"

" Still up north."

" You're a coupla suckers," Red said. " Felt and his sidekicker tried to make the banker in town open his bank for them. They killed him when he refused. Then they killed an old sheepherder."

" We didn't have nothin' to do with that."

" No. You know Felt an' that other man was killers an' you was waitin' for them. . The four o' you was goin' to Brinnon's if them other two showed up. They wasn't gonna show up. So you're guilty as Felt an' his friend. You was bent on murder."

" No, Starling ! We was just keepin' watch."

" For a coupla killers. That's just as bad."

The two found nothing to say to that, and Red continued: " Walters double-crossed you, too. He had three men down here you didn't know about—Considine, Molliter and Blinky. Walters thought he was cute, but he set you fellas to workin' at cross purposes. Well, how'll you have it ?"

" Have what ?"

" Rope or gun ?"

" You ain't gonna kill us, are you ?"

" You asked me for a job. If I'd got in your way, what would you have done to me ?"

" Why, nothin'."

Red's gun was still against the back of the man's neck. He pressed it hard.

" I—I s'pose I wouldn't have let you stand in my way," the man admitted.

" You think we oughta let you stand in our way, huh ?"

The man seemed unable to think of an adequate answer to that. Both he and his partner were silent.

" We'll give 'em the same medicine we give Felt an' the other one," Ed said.

" I'll have to go get my rope," Red said.

" I can go get it."

" Each man for his own rope."

Red hastened along the creek to where the horses had been left. As he returned to the canyon he heard two shots in quick succession. Had those two jumped Ed and overpowered him ? Had both then fired bullets into him ? Red was aghast.

Looping the rope over his shoulder out of habit of not losing a rope when he was abroad, Red ran forward. He might be running to his death, he told himself, but he would get one of those killers at least.

He was almost opposite the break. Ed stepped out, both his guns holstered. Red reached him and stood staring at him.

" I knowed them two would be des'prit," Ed drawled. " Their on'y chance was to jump me. They tried it. Sorry, Starling. I know you wanted to rope 'em up, but I hadda pertect myself, didn't I ?"

" An' you hadda scare me outa my boots," Red breathed.

" You still got your boots on. Well, what now ?"

" The country's clear 'cept for Considine. I guess you'll wanta break the news to that boy, won't you ?"

" How far to Brinnon's ?"

" Not very far."

" I could do with somethin' to eat."

" Well, shore. We'll ride over there."

They reached Brinnon's in due time, and Sue was the first to run out to them. Brinnon followed more slowly. Sue only smiled at Red, and Red smiled back at her. Then Red looked at the old cowman. Brinnon seemed merely waiting.

" We hadda take care of a few fellas that was after you, Mr. Brinnon," Red said.

" I s'pose, so " Brinnon said, and he displayed no resentment. The fact was that Sue had had a spirited talk with him. She had not persuaded him to relent toward Red, but she had pointed out severely that Red was fighting his fight. Whether he liked that or not, he would, Sue said, have to admit that Red was a fighting man, and therefore should be a man after his own heart.

" Who's your friend ?" Brinnon asked.

Red presented Ed to Sue and to Brinnon. Brinnon only nodded, and then he thought to ask : " Puncher ?"

" Yeh," Ed answered.

" Been justice of the peace lately in town," Red supplied. " Quit his job to ride with me. . . . Sue, will you go into the house ?"

" No, Red. I can stand it to hear what you have to tell."

" Brinnon," said Red sharply, " Warren was murdered last night by two men that was after you in the first place. They changed their minds and tried to hold up Warren. He resisted and they killed him with a gun bar'l."

" Warren ?" the shocked Brinnon gasped. ' Why, he's been my friend for years."

" Then them two killed a poor old sheepherder," Red continued without pity, for he wanted to get this information across to the old man. " We hung 'em up."

" A good job, son," Brinnon said, his eyes cast down.

" Give him the money, Ed," Red instructed.

Brinnon looked up as Ed produced the roll of money. He handed it down to Brinnon and Brinnon stood looking at it..

" Five thousand dollars," Red said. " The amount Walters was willin' to pay to get even with you. Felt might have collected it, too, if he hadn't been tempted in another direction."

" Was Considine one of the men you strung up or got rid of otherwise ?" Brinnon asked.

" Considine is still loose. I dunno where he is. I'll get him. He don't know what's happened. He may think he can still collect that money you're handlin'."

As he stood there gazing down at the money, Red guessed that the sensitive, high-spirited old cowman was fighting as bitter a battle as he had ever fought.

At last Brinnon looked at Sue. She only waited, not even urging him with her eyes.

" I reckon Considine is your man, Red," said Brinnon slightly unevenly. He breathed deeply and added : " Go get him. You an' Ed want somethin' to eat, I reckon. You better rest, too. Considine can wait. You got time now."

About noon Ed left for the Warren ranch. Brinnon told

him : " If Warren's boy needs advice or help, tell him to come to me."

" I'll do that," said Ed heartily. " Red is gonna wait for me. I'll let you know what the boy says when I come back about nine—ten o'clock. I gotta sleep a little myself."

CHAPTER XV

Game Horse

A LITTLE after eight that night Red rested, and Sue stood in front of a corral. Brinnon had insisted that Red sleep in the house and Red had waked half an hour ago and had eaten food which Sue had prepared herself.

They talked for a long time, and their principal subject was the change in Brinnon. Sue said : " If this thing were over, Red, I'd be happy. Father will give in long before fall. It'll be hard for him but he'll do it. I know the signs."

" When I clean up the entire mess," said Red, " he'll have to give in. Ed and I will ride again as soon as Ed gets here. Do you think your father will send men after us ? "

" Not now. He knows you've won the right to finish what you've started."

" You're as game as ever," Red said.

" I'm not ! I've been scared. But I'll just have to let you go on." She shivered and looked toward the house. Punchers were awake in the bunk house, but, so far as she could see, no one was outside. " Hold me for a minute, Red," she said.

Red took her in his arms and kissed her. She was quiet for a moment and then released herself.

" I'll say good-bye now," she said. " Come back soon, Red."

Red could not fix a definite time for his return, for he could not be sure when he would be back ; he only promised that it would be as soon as possible.

Sue went along to the house. Red could see her plainly in the moonlight . When she was in front of the bunk house, he heard a door slammed. Well, mebbe not slammed but closed quick. Son of a gun ! Old Brinnon must have been watching and have seen that embrace. That was one for him ! It would help him make up his mind for or against Red.

Red waited for ten minutes. Then two men rode into the yard. Red recognized Ed. The other rider he was sure he did not know. They came up to him and Ed introduced Hal Warren, son of the banker.

" He said he hadda come along," Ed explained simply.

" It's all right," said Red. " I'm sorry, Warren."

Warren was not more than twenty. Though so young, he resembled his father. He merely nodded. Red saw that his face was hard and his eyes were clouded from grief. Still he looked dependable.

" I'll be with you in a minute," Red said.

He went along to the house and knocked on the door. Brinnon opened it. Red thought he might glare but he did not. He merely said in a low voice : " Yeh, Red ?"

" Young Warren is here. Thought you might want to speak to him."

" Yes, I do."

Red and Brinnon went down to where Ed and young Warren waited. Brinnon put up a hand to the boy.

" There ain't no use in askin' you to stay here, son," the old man said. " I know you gotta ride. When you come back, you can call on me for anything. Your father was my friend."

The boy, not trusting himself to speak, merely nodded and looked away.

" I see you got fresh horses, Ed," Red said. " Mr. Brinnon, what's the toughest, fastest horse you got ?"

" It's about a stand-off between a roan an' a calico horse. Better take the roan. I ain't never knowed him to buck, but he'll run till his heart breaks, I'm sure."

" The horse for me," Red said.

He got the roan out of a corral, and the horse proved as gentle as a kitten. He was long and wiry though, and, Red was sure, dependable.

As Red mounted, he looked around with a mildly inquiring eye.

Waving to Brinnon, the three set off. They had no notion where they might find Considine, but they were positive he would not go to town. Ed said he had not seen the man in town since he had had his trouble a while ago. He had been reported as seeking food and shelter from several ranchmen.

The three rode over to Juniper Creek and searched along it. They failed to turn up Considine.

" I got an idea the fella would look up some small cowman if he wanted food," Ed said. " He might rest for a while."

" Singleton's is the nearest place," Red said. " He wouldn't go there, though. Singleton has a big outfit, and Considine would know that he'd get no welcome, Singleton havin' heard all about him. There's a small outfit about five miles from here beyond the hills."

" Wanta take a shot at that ?" Ed asked.

" You and Warren might go over there," Red said. " I could stay out on the flat and watch."

" You tryin' to get rid of us ?" Ed asked.

" Honest, I ain't. Fact is, I'm givin' you a chance. You might get Considine while I'm waitin'. If you wanta, I'll go

over to that little ranch an' you can watch here. I'm out to give you two a break. Let Warren decide."

"Let's you an' me go over to that ranch, Ed," young Warren said. "We can be back before long. Tell us how to get there, Red."

Red gave them careful direction and they left. Red then rode along the creek for a way and cut out on the flat. He stopped when he was beyond gunfire from among the trees and the hills. No one could get to him without his seeing him. Of course, if Considine came, he would not approach Red, but Red was satisfied with that. Considine would be caught in the end if he were still in this country. One thing at a time. Ed and Warren might bring Considine in from that ranch.

Red sat his horse for half an hour, turning his head to gaze in all directions from time to time. A few more minutes passed and still there was nothing.

And then a rider appeared from among the trees along the creek.

Red could not make him out, and he appeared not to see Red. He turned toward the hills. That assured Red that he was neither Ed nor young Warren returning.

Red let the rider get two hundred feet along the trees and then he wheeled his horse and sent him toward the other horse. The roan sped along with the fleetness of a frightened deer, his hoofs making little sound.

The other rider was walking his horse, and he did not hear Red's horse approaching till Red was within easy firing distance. Then he wheeled his horse, and there was a movement of his arm.

Red knew that he was going for his gun.

Red drew his own gun and fired, holding his elbows hard against his side. The man fell forward and Red thought he was holding hard to the horn. The horse began to run. The man rolled off him. Red went in a little way and then stopped his horse and dismounted.

He did not know whether the man was dead or not, so he went in among the trees and worked his way forward. He presently heard a low moaning.

When Red reached the man he quickly knelt, for he saw that no fight was left in him. The man proved to be not much older than young Warren. Red recognized him.

He was the son of that ranchman toward whose house Ed and Warren were riding.

Red had always considered killing a man an act of justice and necessity, but he could not consider the killing of this man such an act. He felt dismay, regret and grief, for death had taken hold of one whom Red knew a little, and whom he believed to be colourless and harmless. It was like killing a mild animal unable to protect itself.

"How did you get in on this thing?" Red asked.

He was afraid that the man would protest that he had been doing nothing, and Red might have some difficulty in proving that he had been. But in men unused to violence, frankness is bred by the imminence of death.

"We was so poor," the man moaned. "I never got no chance to go to town. I never had no fun. He said——"

Red leaned lower. He was sure that Considine might be near, but he paid no attention to that. His concern was all for the youngster and for what the youngster might tell him. Indeed to have saved him, he would have let his questions go. Well, he would have to let them go. Life had departed from that slim body.

Red stood up. Strangely, he thought of Sue. Sue would be intensely sorry for this man. He had been lonely, and Red himself knew what a hell loneliness could create. Other young men had gone to town and had had their fling. He had stayed on a small ranch with only a disheartened old father for company. The father had simply been one of those men who couldn't make a go of things.

"I guess I gotta let everything slide for a while," Red told himself. "Considine better not go to Brinnon's an' he better not come near me."

He had known all along, of course, that there would be work to do when the stupid Considine was disposed of, but now he became intent only on taking this young man's body to the father. It was his duty to face the old man and tell him exactly what had happened. That certainly, was what Sue would want. Red found himself looking at this happening with her eyes, since, in the pity of it, it was out of the ordinary run.

He got the man's horse, put the body across it, and leading that horse, set out for the little ranch. When he reached it, he found Ed Warren and the old ranchman there. Red had hitherto observed how a man could flame up from the depths of despair and become a fighter. When there was only despair, a man yielded to it, but he might revert to what he had been if the despair were broken through by someone else, helpless though he himself might be to break through it on his own account.

As Red stopped his horse and drew the other laden horse up beside his, the ranchman detached himself from Ed and Warren and walked slowly toward the two animals. Ed and Warren remained where they were, and Red had a notion that they had obtained a good deal of information from the ranchman.

Red saw that the ranchman wore no gun, and so he let his own guns stay at rest. The ranchman at first ignored Red. He seemed only to want to view the face of the dead man. One glance seemed to suffice. Then he looked up at Red, across the body.

"You hadda do it, Red ?" he asked.

Red's heart leaped when the ranchman said "hadda." The old fellow was attaching no blame to him. Still Red must give him the facts.

"Yeh, I know," the ranchman said when Red had finished. "The boy was lonely. I often told him to strike out for himself an' leave me here by myself. He wouldn't do it. He said he wouldn't quit me. Considine has been comin' here off an' on. The boy seemed to kind o' take to him. The two had long talks together. Tonight they got ready to ride. I knowed about this Considine. He ain't no good. I tol' my boy not to go with him. He reminded me o' what I had said to him. It's been a long time since I have used a gun. Starling, I'm wearied. So I let them ride off. What happens to me don't so much matter. I'll just lead this horse off and I'll take care of the body later."

"Don't you want me an' them two boys to help ?" Red asked.

"I'd rather do it my own self."

"I'd like a few words with you," Red said.

The ranchman led the horse along in front of the house and left him near a small corral. He returned immediately and Red dismounted and called to Ed and Warren. The four stood together.

Red related to the ranchman all that had happened. The ranchman was thoughtful for a while and then he said : "I see. Well, Starling, when a man gets started along that path he don't turn back. I reckon you done me an' my boy a favour. It's plain, ain't it, that my boy didn't really do nothin' but go for his gun when you hove in sight ? If you hadn't got him an' he'd followed Considine, Gawd on'y knows what his end would have been. I fed an' sheltered Considine just as I would've done for any puncher, an' he tried to make my boy a murderer an' a thief. I think he's gone to Brinnon's. The best thing you can do is to get over there."

"Looks to me," Red said, "that Considine has picked on your place as hide-out. If he's drove off from Brinnon's, he may come here again."

That flame which Red had known about seemed to rise in the old man.

"You three just go about your business," he said. "I'll be here if Considine comes."

Considine might get him, Red was tempted to tell the old man, but he forebore. The old man had enough to bear.

"Well, come on, boys," he said.

They rode away from the ranch house for some distance, and then knowing the old man would be busy, they stopped. "We don't wanta leave him alone," said Red.

"Shore not," Ed nodded. "You go on to Brinnon's. I think that fool Considine is headed over there. I b'l'eve he

still has got an idea there's five thousand in it for him if he kills Brinnon. We can't keep up with that horse you got. We'll go on to Juniper Creek, though, an' we'll make sure that Considine don't get through to that old man."

So on that strange horse, gentle but hard as nails, Red started for Brinnon's. He knew that Considine was on his way to Brinnon's in the darkness. One thing that stood out was that Considine was so ignorant of what had happened. And he was completely the fool that Ed had called him. He might ride up to Brinnon's in the hope of getting one shot at Brinnon and then fleeing, possibly back to the ranchman's.

That horse was fleet and Red's need seemed to lend an additional fleetness to him.

So in the first mile Red was as if he were alone physically. His mind had leaped before him and it was now in Brinnon's ranch house, where Considine might be menacing the girl Red loved. That seemed far-fetched, but Red remembered that there had been a great deal of double-crossing. It might actually be that Considine was Walters' segundo. Walters seemed to have a mind which worked deviously. He had put a mumber of men at the task of getting even with Brinnon.

And Considine, here at what seemed the last, might have had a big bunch of men awaiting him. He might be able to take Brinnon's place by storm.

Red soon found himself fighting off terror. He found himself making mental pictures of what Considine might do. Sweat broke out on his body and ran down it. He knew then that he must put terror away. He could not permit it to weaken him. He shut the door of his mind, and thereafter he was one with his horse, though he sat as lightly as a feather in the saddle. His face was hard and drawn. If he had been more alive to himself, he might almost have felt the lines that were being graven into it. His lids were narrowed and between the slits the eyes gleamed steadily. Straight ahead of him he stared.

He came to himself with a start and stared about him. He briefly wondered that he had come so far. He saw that he had unconsciously been guiding the horse straight toward the ranch house. He was no longer following the creek, but had broken away from it diagonally. He saw trees in the distance, and he knew that he would come presently to the fence of a seeded pasture.

He turned the horse a little, so that he should come around the corner of this fence, and then he became aware that the horse was tiring. Its breathing was fast. There was a kind of pitiful sob in the low sound of it. Between his legs Red felt the animal's body distend and contract. There was a foam of lather at the edges of the saddle.

Red leaned down.

"Good horse," he said, "it's for the girl. If we gotta break our hearts, we gotta do it. If you ain't no good no more, after

we get through with this, I'll look after you as long as you live. You know, little horse, I wouldn't break you if it wasn't for the girl. I wouldn't ask a horse to kill himself if it wasn't absolutely necessary. You get me, don't you ?"

The low voice was scarcely audible, but the sound of it seemed to carry to the horse's ears. He laid those ears back briefly, lifted his head and shook it, and shuddered all through his body.

Red had so judged his course that they came to the corner of the fence with such precision that they could sweep around it with only a slight turning. The ranch house was not more than a quarter of a mile away. Red tried to run the horse so that he would come around the corner and miss the post by a hair.

But the horse had given all he had. He might have carried Red to the ranch house if the course had been straight away, but he was not capable of swerving his body ever so little. Red tried to bring him about as he went past the post. His head came around. Red saw his pulled lip, as, in his great fatigue, he yielded to the bit. It seemed as if all the strength had gone out of a mouth ordinarily hard.

And then, while his head was so, he plunged forward and went down on his left shoulder. Red came free of him lightly and landed on his feet beside him.

For the space which he needed to take one long deep breath, Red tried to get the horse to its feet. But its exhaustion was utter. It had been ridden hard and far, and the wild dash through the sand had taken its last ounce of strength. It stretched out its head and lay with heaving sides. " Sorry, horse," Red said; and he ran his hand as gently along the horse's neck as if the animal had been a stricken woman.

Then he began to run. He was not accustomed to running and his boots were not built for it. But he trotted on doggedly, his hands on his holsters.

He came first to the bunk house, but he had no thought of rousing the men in it. There must be no noise, no clamour here. Considine might be in the house. If he found himself hemmed in by a circling gang of men, he would somehow sacrifice Sue to save himself. He was the kind of killer, Red was sure, who would kill a woman as quickly as he would kill a man in an acute situation.

One fact seemed plain : Considine had no outfit with him. Thinking Brinnon unprepared, he had come alone, if he had come at all.

When he came to the bunk house door, he found it open, and two punchers leaped out. Recognizing Red, they lowered their guns. Men, Red could make out, were just behind them. Red stopped and whispered to the men : " For Gawd's sake, don't make a move. Leave things to me. If you hear any firin', come in."

He ran on, knowing the punchers would trust him. And he was overjoyed to be convinced, even for a moment, that Considine had not come. Yet he might have. The men hadn't been guarding the house closely. Brinnon, scornful as usual, had probably thought the danger of attack remote. He had merely kept men on guard in the bunk house, and they had faithfully remained awake, and had come out at the first sound.

Red arrived in the rear of the house. He stood for a moment looking, listening. The house lay in the moonlight as still as if it had been untenanted. Red took off his hat and mopped his forehead. If it had not been for Sue, he would have been cool. Now he was disturbed.

What had happened ? Had Considine been here ? Had he gone ? Was he still here ? Was he waiting somewhere in the house ? Or was he outside it, his gun in his hand, his body shrunken together, his killer's eyes hard as marble, his mouth clamped till the lips had almost disappeared ? Red could almost picture him so. Or if he had gone, what had he done ? Was Sue safely asleep up there in the house—— Or what ?

CHAPTER XVI

Low Voices.

THAT THOUGHT spurred Red into action. He knew that time was precious, yet he felt that he must have a horse. He might need to pursue Considine suddenly. When a man has lived all his life atop a horse, he feels lost when one is not ready in an emergency.

Red ran to the nearest corral. As he did so, he saw the roan approaching him. The roan displayed little life, but it came directly up to Red. He stripped his gear from it, lowered bars, and let it go inside. He watched it closely and told himself that it was not busted. By gosh, he would own that horse some day.

Ahead of him was a horse lying down. As Red sprang to its head, it started to scramble to its feet, but he had the bridle on it before it came erect. It docilely submitted to being led, and accepted the hastily flung saddle. Red led it out of the corral and left it standing beside the kitchen door.

He drew his gun and put his hand on the door latch. It gave under his slow pressure without a sound, and without a sound he opened the door. By now the moon was far up in the sky, but the room was flooded with its light from a rear window. Red's eyes at once took in all the homely details of the kitchen, and he was sure nothing had happened there. It was certainly as it had been left after supper.

He moved slightly to the sitting room which led off the kitchen and opened the door to that, soundlessly. Here again was the same indication of the usual order. This room faced away from the moon, but Red had left the door open and the light came across the floor. An open stairway, leading to the second floor, was at once his objective. He tiptoed to it and started up it.

He had never been on the upper floor, but he found that his curiously alert brain brought back to him recollection of details. He had once been in the house in Brinnon's absence. Sue had gone upstairs. He remembered that her footsteps had sounded along a hall before she had opened a door. Then there was a hall up there with rooms along it.

He was halfway up the stairs when he arrived at this conclusion. He quickened his steps. At the top of the stairs he stopped and stared along the hall—which was just as he had pictured it. There was a norrow passageway with the doors which he had thought were there, and at the far end a single window. This, Red saw, was open.

And there was nothing here but silence.

A sudden reaction came to Red. He felt his whole body relax. A sort of sheepish grin came to his lips. He seemed to have got excited about nothing. He might have known that that fellow Considine wouldn't have the nerve to come here. He was a killer perhaps, but like all killers he was a sneak. He wouldn't pen himself in a house in an effort to get his man. He would lie in wait for him, and he would have everything arranged so that his escape would be sure.

At that Red thought of Brinnon. He couldn't be in the house. If he had been he would have been downstairs and would have heard Red. Red believed he would have been awake, but if he had not been Red's movements would have roused him.

Then where the devil was he ? Red began to worry again. He was brought back to his own situation. Sue surely was here. What if she should wake up ? What if a sense that there was an intruder in the house brought her to one of those doors ? Red would look pretty, wouldn't he ? In his embarrassment he forgot that he would have a sound explanation. He only had a feeling that he should get out of the house as quickly as possible.

He started to turn to go down the stairs. Then, without warning, the sound of low voices came to him.

Gripped by amazement, he stood stockstill for a moment. He could not understand this development. He had come here expecting violence. Now there was only the drone of voices. Beyond a door to his left two persons were talking together. They seemed to be talking without excitement. They might have been discussing their affairs at the end of the day.

Who were they ? That was the thought which Red came

to at last. One voice was a girl's. That must be Sue's. It must be Sue's, and yet it held a throaty quality which Red had never heard in Sue's voice before. The other voice was a man's. Red realized suddenly that it had been in his ears continuously for perhaps half a minute. The man therefore was "getting something told" to the girl. It seemed to Red that a man was laying down the law to Sue.

Was the man Considine? Were he and Sue beyond that door? If so, Considine had indeed come to the house and he had intruded into Sue's room. Red's blood boiled. The heat of it seemed to dry his lips and sear his eyes. He was conscious of a terrific thirst.

He knew for the first time in his life, what a killer's mood was. He fought back the wild fury that flamed in him. He must be cool. He must. He must! Twice he said those two words to himself, and then, whether it was the result of his silent command to himself or mere reaction, he was all at once icy. He might have been frozen while he had stood there.

The man beyond the door was undoubtedly Considine. Considine was a killer. Well, he was not the only killer tonight. Red felt that he could slay Considine in this terrific moment and think nothing of it. So he moved toward the door, his gun in his hand. He was aware now that he moved in silence. The sound of the voices died away. The house was already prophetically like the house of the dead.

He had, however, no time to reach the door. It was suddenly thrown open, and Sue and Considine came through it. Red recognized Considine at once, for he was beyond Sue and his face was turned toward her. He had not shaved for several days and there was bristle of red beard on his cheeks. His hat was pushed back from his face, and Red saw that the eyes with which he regarded Sue were threatening.

The passage of the two through the door was unfortunate for Red. The girl was a shield for the man. She did not, of course, know that Red was there, and unconsciously she moved so that Red could not cover Considine. He could have commanded the man to stop, but immediately Considine could have seized Sue and have held her so that Red would not dare to fire. Holding Sue with one arm, Considine could then have whipped out his gun and have put a bullet into Red.

But they must turn to come toward the head of the stairs. That, Red knew, was his only hope. He waited. It seemed to him that much time passed before Considine reached back and closed the door and then started to come around Sue. Unconsciously Red moved a foot so that his legs should be a little spread. That was unfortunate, too, for beneath the foot a board creaked.

What happened then made a picture in Red's brain for a long time. He saw Considine take Sue by the shoulders and thrust her forward in front of him. Considine's right hand

came around Sue and he fired point blank at Red. Red felt the bullet tear through his left arm. He tried hard to hold the gun in that hand but it slipped from fingers suddenly gone nerveless.

Red had never had to accept a bullet before. He had no means of deciding how badly he was hit. The pain, the nervelessness, might be caused by a superficial wound, a wound deep in the flesh might be required to produce it. He would find out about that after a while.

Just now Considine was still beyond him.

So far luck had been with Considine. Now it turned in Red's favour. He did not consider it so but it was a fact. When the gun dropped to the floor, he instinctively stooped to pick it up. There was a burning pain in his arm still, and he felt a whirling sensation in the pit of his stomach as he bent over. To his intense surprise and disgust he dropped to the floor on his side.

He heard a cry from Sue and an exclamation from Considine. He groped for the gun with his right hand, and Considine must have seen that. Instead of leaping for the stairs Considine wheeled and darted for the window at the end of the hall. The killer's panic was on him. Walls were a prison for him, and he was making for the open. Red sensed that every instinct was urging him toward flight.

"Yellow," he told himself. "I knew it! He thinks I *might* get him."

He got a little unsteadily to his feet. Sue was beside him as he came erect. She did not touch him however. After one glance at his face she turned her own face toward the window. She seemed to know that she must keep back, and she retreated till she was against the wall.

A kind of vicious hatred of himself and his momentary weakness came upon Red then.

He waited for Considine to reach the window. He would put a bullet into the fellow as he was about to escape through that window. Then the body would tumble out of Sue's sight. This whole business was tough for her.

Considine, however, did not stop to crawl through the window. Without a break in his running, he hurtled himself throught it. Red was aware that only a few feet below the opening there was a shed. He heard Considine's body strike this and then slide down it. There was a thud as the man struck the ground and the sound of his running.

Red ran to the window and looked out. The punchers had taken no action, for the good reason that they had not known who had fired. They could not run to the scene from the bunkhouse door and open fire on their own account, for, so far as they were aware, only Red was hereabouts.

Red saw Considine running toward a clump of trees which grew about a spring a hundred feet from the house. Red knew

at once, because of the clear thinking of which he was now capable, that Considine had his horse hidden among those trees.

Red remembered the saddled horse which stood at the kitchen door. A kind of grim coldness came upon him. He would not hurry. Let Considine do the hurrying. The man who won this fight and this race must move surely but without unconsidered haste.

He heard Sue behind him, but he did not turn to look at her. He lifted a foot and thrust a leg through the window. In a moment he had slid down the roof and had dropped to the ground. As he ran toward his horse he worked the fingers of his left hand. They seemed stiff and there were little prickles in them as if they had gone to sleep. However, he discovered, as he leaped into the saddle, that he could not use the arm.

He wheeled the horse, came about around the corner of the house, and dashed straight toward the clump of trees, his gun in his hand. No thought of danger came to him. It did not occur to him that Considine could stand among the trees and shoot him down as he came on. What was uppermost in his mind was that he had made Considine run. Therefore Considine had nothing in his own mind but the thought of flight. A kind of exaltation was now upon Red and he could think no more clearly than that.

It was clear enough thinking, for before Red reached the clump of trees, Considine dashed out of them, so that he came within full view of Red. Either he had not seen Red coming or he was depending upon a good horse to carry him to safety. His way lay toward the road, and Red understood that he was trying to get to that smoother going so that he could send the horse forward in a wild gallop. When he thought he was safe from immediate pursuit, he would leave the road and seek safety in one of the many hideouts he knew about.

Red himself immediately cut in toward the road. As he did so, there was a shout behind him. He turned and found that a horse was coming toward him from the direction of the house. Red couldn't guess who was aboard that horse, and he didn't care. It might be old Brinnon. Well, Brinnon had better keep out of this. Red wanted no interference. Brinnon could mind his own business, Those fleeting thoughts expressed Red's present grim humour as much as anything else could have done.

Also he saw that whatever horse Brinnon rode was no match for the horse he himself was astride.

Considine's horse, he saw, was extending himself now. He was plunging forward with all the strength that was in a good body. And at each jump Considine was raking him. Red sent his own horse forward but he did not touch him. He wanted him to reserve a measure of strength if it should be needed later.

Now he began to work his left arm up and down to discover

whether he could bring its former life to it. What he did was to start a spurt of blood. He could feel it gush out and run down the arm. The arm dropped limply to his side, and he was conscious of a giddiness which made the fleeing horse in front of him reel as if it were about to fall.

"Damn!" he whispered. "I got to finish this quick. I haven't got long."

Always light in the saddle, he now felt as if he were no weight on the horse at all. He became aware that he was pressing his knees into the horse's sides as if to keep himself from being wafted from the saddle. Wafted? How come he used that word? He had never used it before that he knew of. Pretty good word—wafted.

He shook his head angrily. Damn it, he was going lightheaded! He relaxed and pushed his feet into the stirrups. There was no danger of his falling off his horse. Why, it took a mighty good horse to throw him.

Well, where was that Considine fellow? Ah, yes, he was on the road. Already his horse was pounding down it. At this rate he would carry Considine swiftly out of Red's reach. Red raked his horse then and the animal sprang forward. He had never been raked like that before. He seemed to sense that this was no ordinary errand that he was upon. Damn good horse! Well, yes, old Brinnon, good judge of horseflesh, wouldn't have a poor horse in any string.

"Why, I b'l'eve this horse can run Considine's horse down," Red told himself.

The thought seemed to clear his sight. All at once Considine's horse defined himself with startling clearness in the moonlight. Red could see Considine plying a quirt, using his spurs. Probably he was cursing the horse into a greater burst of speed.

Red wrapped his reins about his useless left wrist and fired at Considine with the gun in his right hand. To his surprise the big gun kicked high. What, in heaven's name, was the matter with his wrist? Was he so weak that he couldn't hold a gun? He tried again, but this time he thought the bullet struck the road behind Considine.

Behind him now he heard a thunder of hoofs. That would be old Brinnon, getting out of his horse all he could. This would be a hell of a time to let Brinnon get in on anything. Brinnon wasn't going to be on this finish. Red simply must take Considine by himself. If he didn't Brinnon would laugh at him. Oh, how Brinnon would laugh! He would say that, old as he was, he was a better man than Red still.

While his horse sped on, Red again gripped its sides with his knees, somehow opened up his gun, and refilled it. There! He was all set. He would get this Considine person now. He would get him immediate.

So he set himself to overtake Considine. It seemed useless,

for some reason, to try to bring Considine down from this distance. But let them get closer, just a little closer.

Red rode then as he had never ridden before. He handled his horse as he had never handled a horse before. He urged him on with spur and with voice. He leaned to him to tell him how good he was. He had a true horseman's belief that a horse can be swayed by entreaty, and he came as near to prayer in his entreaties as he had ever come in anything.

He was not surprised that he began to cut down the distance between himself and Considine. He counted that only as a logical result of what he was trying to do. He did not remember that Considine's horse had already been called upon for a good deal that night. It happened, too, that Red's horse was as good as Considine's at even odds.

Red felt no special thrill as he began to overtake Considine. His mind was filled with something else. Considine was a killer. He had killed one man and had got away with it. Certainly he deserved death more than any other man Red knew. But could Red kill him ? Could he send a bullet directly into his body, knowing that it might end Considine's life on the instant ? He felt himself catch his breath as he clearly considered that.

No ! He couldn't do it. Considine's back was to him. He couldn't fatally shoot a man in the back. He would only be warranted in bringing Considine down. Well, he'd just do that. He thrilled as he accepted that as a fact. With the odds against him he would bring down the killer, the dead shot, the man who had killed another man in cold blood. There was a little smile of happiness on Red's face as the situation suddenly became so clear and simple.

He was gaining rapidly now. Considine's horse seemed to be tiring. At any rate Red was astonished when he suddenly realized that no more than a hundred feet separated him and Considine.

Then Considine drew down his horse and wheeled him on clustered feet. Immediately he began to shoot. Red could see the flashes from the gun. He could hear the reports. The killer had gone into action. No dismay came to Red. He sent his horse straight on, straight at the other horse.

Those flashes, those reports continued. Then there was silence, broken only by a thunder of hoofs close behind Red.

Red, faint though he was growing from loss of blood, knew what had happened. Considine, in a flurry of fear, had shot himself out. And behind Red, Brinnon was bearing down, to be in at the finish. Even now Considine would be reloading and in a moment more Brinnon's gun would begin to bark.

But Red did not check his horse till he was within twenty feet of Considine. Then he slid the horse to a stop. His gun came up. He saw Considino's right hand rise. There was a report. Red could not tell whether it was from his own gun or

from Considine's. In any event his own gun was gone. It had slipped from his fingers to the road.

He was facing the killer without a weapon of any kind to protect himself, and a mist was rising before his eyes. Considine's horse seemed to have retreated. Well, why didn't Considine shoot? Why didn't he finish the thing? Red knew that he was going to fall. He would like to be in the saddle, his head up, when he took Considine's bullet.

And then he laughed. He thought he laughed loudly but it was only a chuckle in his throat. Considine's horse had come nearer to him. The horse seemed to have drifted in on him without moving. He was so close that Red could have put out a hand and have touched him. He was breathing hard and his head was down.

But there was no rider on his back!

Red forced himself to look down. The effort sent a stab of pain from the top of his spine up into his brain. He was barely able to focus his eyes. What he saw was a sufficient reward for his painful effort. Considine was lying in the road, on his back, his arms outflung, his unshaven, ugly face turned up to the moon. His long red hair was a mat on each side of his head.

Red did indeed laugh then. He threw up his head and the laugh came clearly. So that was all the good a killer was when it came to a fight man to man. The laugh died suddenly. Red had a feeling of strangeness. He was slipping into something dark and deep, a canyon of blackness from which he might not emerge. He forced his head up and gripped the horn with both hands. Strength seemed to have come to that numb hand now. He would sit there till he got himself together. Then——

But the darkness came like an enveloping cloud. He knew he was going down. In another minute he would be lying there by Considine. He would be there for a long time. Perhaps Considine was not badly hurt. He might revive and finish Red. Well, there was nothing to be done about it. The blackness was suffocating now. Red was slipping far down into it.

But he did not go altogether. He felt an arm across his shoulders. He heard Brinnon's voice in his ears.

"Take it easy, old son. She's on'y a scratch, wherever she is. You got Considine. You got him by yourself. Ol' Brinnon takes his hat off to you."

Red took hold of himself. He shook his head and was astonished that he could see fairly clearly. Brinnon was trying to put one over on him. Why, this business wasn't half finished and Brinnon was trying to take charge.

Red sat there waiting. He would let Brinnon go on. Hell, he would be crafty with the old boy. He despised crafty men, but just the same he wouldn't let Brinnon fool him.

"Lemme have a look at that arm," said Brinnon.

There he went. That was his first move. All right! Red would let him look at the wound, but while Brinnon looked, Red would look too. He had never been hurt before, but he knew something about hurts. Brinnon, try as he might, could put nothing over on him.

Red was astonished that his strength returned rapidly. In a few minutes he rolled up his sleeve. Brinnon bent over the wound. Red had to lower his head to get his view. He flushed.

"We'll go back to the house," Brinnon said. "The wound don't amount to much. It'll be all right in a few days. Y'see, son, the first gunshot wound a man gets kinda carries him off'n his feet. It's a shock an' no doubt about it. A fella can't tell whether he's got his death or not. I've seen good men fall outa their saddles when they was on'y nicked."

Red found nothing to say. He had begun to realize that that was the situation before Brinnon analysed it.

"I guess that's right," he said.

"I know it's right," Brinnon asserted. "Come on back to the house. Course you've lost a little piece o' flesh an' we gotta clean up the arm. Lucky it was your left arm."

As they started to ride toward the house, they saw a number of riders coming toward them slowly. When they arrived they proved to be Brinnon's punchers and Ed and young Warren.

"We thought we better come over here," Ed said, "you was so long gone. Is that Considine?"

"Yeh," Red answered.

Neither Ed nor Warren had anything to say to that. Brinnon ordered several punchers to care for Considine, and all the rest returned to the house. Brinnon started to take Red inside. Red freed himself and turned on the punchers.

"I'm still runnin' this show," he said.

The punchers said nothing, because there was nothing to say.

"There's one thing I wanta speak about," said Warren. "Far as I can see this business started as a quarrel between Brinnon an' a fella named Walters. That's what I get from Ed. But an ol' sheep herder that never harmed nobody is dead. My father is dead. He never harmed nobody neither. The son of a strugglin' ranchman over yonder is dead. It ain't fit that Walters should go on livin'. He started all this business."

"Mebbe I started it," Brinnon said. "I chased Walters off. Mebbe I had no right to do that."

"We know all about that," Red stated. "You was in the right. Well, this country is clean. Walters is for me an' Ed an' Warren."

"We'll talk that over when you get well," a puncher declared.

"You mean you might start somethin' while my arm is mendin'?" Red demanded.

"We don't start nothin' 'thout we get an order from Brinnon," the puncher said. "We think we oughta be in on it, though."

"Let it ride, boys," said Brinnon in the strangest voice Red had ever heard him use. "Red, I'm stayin' out here. Jake, you go in an' fix up that wound."

Jake, Red knew, was a grizzled old-timer. He took Red into the house. Sue had hot water ready. She and Red exchanged no word, but she sat beside him as Jake examined the wound.

Jake said nothing. He was too old to waste words. He cleaned the wound and made it as antiseptic as possible.

"It ain't nothin'," he declared, "even though it prob'ly made you sick. You'll be all right before a week's out."

"Tell Brinnon to come in here," said Red.

Jake shrugged his shoulders and started for the door.

"Never mind sendin' my father in right away, Jake," Sue ordered.

"I won't say nothin' to him, ma'am." And when he was gone Sue said to Red: "I'll see that nothing happens till you get well, Red."

"A young fella's dead, Warren's father's dead, an' there ain't no reason in it," Red said.

"There's no reason in men's violence," Sue said, "but when a thing is started it has to be finished. Walters must be dealt with."

CHAPTER XVII

Changing Men

Red slept. Of the passage of time he had no knowledge. He dreamed that he was choking for a drink and that there was a redhot band about his arm.

Some time later he knew he was awake. He was thirsty all right but there was no unusual sensation in his arm. His dream as to that had been caused by the fact that Brinnon and Sue had kept hot cloths on the arm throughout the night and into the morning. He did not open his eyes. He wanted to take an inventory of himself before he did that. The only result of that inventory was that his thirst continued and he was hungry. Hell, he was as good as new.

He knew shame then. What must old Brinnon and Jake and all the rest of the men think of him? He had sustained a minor wound and he had acted as if he had been half shot to death.

For a space his mind refused to address itself to what had happened. It was now all like a play which he watched through drowsy eyes. For the first time in his life, coming awake, he

did not want to hop to his feet and get going about the business of the day. He dozed off. People came and went as if they acted parts. Old Brinnon, Sue, Considine, other crooks, they passed and repassed before his mental eye. But they did not seem to concern themselves with him, so why should he concern himself with them ?

The question lingered in his mind like a physical thing. Then his conscience stung him. Why, he was being disloyal to Sue. He had actually asked himself why he should pay any attention to her. And she was standing right before him, looking down at him. She seemed kind of mournful. Her eyes were steady enough, as they always were, but they were very sad. He had hurt Sue, had he ? He put out a hand to her.

It seemed to him that he put out his hand to her as if he dreamed, but immediately the hand was in hers. He did not know how that could be, for she still seemed to be standing back from him. So he opened his eyes. It was funny that he could open his eyes to find her, when he could see her so plainly, but he guessed he had been on the borderland between dreams and reality.

Sue was not standing back from him. She was seated by his bed. His head was a little turned and he was looking directly into her eyes. The eyes were not sad. There was a queer look in them, and he had a notion that scorn was in their depths. So ! That was the hub of the whole business. He had got a nick in his arm and had acted like a baby. That, at least, was Sue's opinion.

" What time is it ? " he asked.

" Oh, going toward noon."

There was a movement at the other side of the bed, and Red turned his head and saw Brinnon pouring water from a pitcher. Brinnon approached him, held the glass to his lips, and offered to lift his head. Red sat up and took the glass with a steady right hand.

" Drink her, son," said Brinnon. " She'll do you good."

Red gulped the water and found that it eased his throat. Brinnon took the glass. Red looked around at Sue, but her eyes were cast down. He was becoming somewhat excited, and he did not notice that the corners of her mouth quivered a little. If he had noticed that, he wouldn't have known what caused it, repressed mirth or increased anger.

" Would you just as leave go away for a while, ma'am ? " he asked. " I wanta have a private word or two with this old man."

Sue raised her head and gave him a shocked glance. She rose and started for the door, turned back. She stood looking down at Red for a moment and then she bent and kissed him. She made for the door rapidly.

" Hi, Sue ! " he cried, " wait a minute. I wasn't awake, I guess. I slept so long I was all mixed up. I'd been dreamin'."

" Talk to my father," she said. " He has plenty to say to you."

She went out and Brinnon sat down beside the bed. There was a complacent look on his face. If it hadn't beenf or Sue's swift departure, Red would have been infuriated. As it was he felt only scorn, and that was defensive. Anyway he could deal with Brinnon.

" I know you think I didn't stand up under a little wound," he said, " but, damn it, it was my first."

" We been over that," Brinnon said. " There ain't nothin' the matter with you this mornin'. No fever, nothin'. That arm'll be good as new in a short time. The punchers has been roamin' the yard all night, 'cause there was a light burnin' in here. Once I went outside to have a smoke an' a bit of air an' one of them asked me was you turnin' bad. I said, 'Oh, no. On'y we're takin' extra precautions with him. I don't want Red to die on me. I ain't never had no son of my own.' "

" Where's my pants an' shirt ? " Red asked.

" There on the chair."

" Get to hell outa here. Them punchers thinks I'm soft. I'll show 'em."

" Gonna lick the hull bunch, huh ? "

" This business between me and Sue is sacred," Red asserted. " You can't make a joke of it."

" I ain't makin' no joke of it," Brinnon declared. " I *want* you for my son. An' that, if you on'y knowed it, is quite an honour. You're my kind of a man."

He stalked from the room and Red sat on the edge of the bed for a while, trying to think things out. At last when he was washed and dressed, he called to Sue. She appeared in the doorway as if she had not been far off.

" Yes, Red," she said.

Red went up to her. He tried to think of something to say ; failed. So he just took her in his arms. They kissed.

" Father has relented, Red," Sue said. " We can be married any time."

" He hasn't changed things any, has he ? " Red asked.

" Not a bit ! Well, come out here and have some breakfast. How's your arm ? "

" Why, I can use it as good as ever. Gosh, you'd have thought I was shot full of holes."

" As good men as you have gone out from a minor wound. Why, I saw a husky puncher faint once from seeing another man chop off a finger when he was cutting wood."

Red ate a substantial breakfast, and that seemed to have been what he had especially needed. He rose, put on his hat, and started for the door.

" When do you leave to go after Walters, Red ? " Sue asked.

" Oh, in a day or so. I think I better let this arm rest that long.'

He went outside. All along the bunk house punchers were squatted. Over an after-breakfast cigarette which he began to roll, Red saw that young Warren and Ed were with the punchers. They remained there. The cigarette alight and held in the corner of his mouth, Red strolled slowly toward the men. Some were smoking; one was drawing designs in the dirt; the others were looking at the ground. However, when Red came to Ed and young Warren, both looked up. Ed grimaced as much as to say that Red could speak to him or could go to hell, as he liked.

Red guessed he understood that. He also understood the silence of the punchers. Brinnon had been talking to all these men. He had told them to leave Red alone. Red believed that every man here, save Ed and Warren was aching to tell him where he headed in but were following Brinnon's order.

However, young Warren had been through the mill. He hadn't yet buried his father on the Warren hillside. His mood proved not to be the mood of the other men. He asked: "Arm better, Red?"

Red could not snap at him but he did not want to answer the question directly, so he merely nodded. Very slowly he continued along the line of men. There was something challenging in his movements. That was too much for a puncher of about Red's age. They knew each other.

"How's your arm, fella?" that puncher inquired.

Red stopped in front of the man and looked down on him. His own eyes met a pair of steady blue ones. The regard held for a moment. The puncher came to his feet. And then Brinnon appeared in the doorway of the bunk house. Red waited for him to speak, but he only silently leaned against the door jamb.

"Who wants to know?" Red asked the puncher.

"I put the question," the puncher answered.

"Is the condition of my arm any of your damn business? Wait a minute! I ain't finished. You're buttin' in on somethin' that don't concern you. My gun is in the house. If you wanta ride with me I'll just go an' get it."

"Suits me fine," the puncher declared. "My own gun is in the bunk house. I'll be wearin' it when you come outa the house—if you do come!"

"You better have it in your hand," Red snapped. "I'll have mine in my holster."

Red stood looking along the line of punchers. The angry one had not seen Brinnon in the bunk house door, and he wheeled and started for that door. He saw Brinnon then and he saw more: Brinnon had a gun in his hand. He had drawn it before the puncher had turned.

"Who's goin' into the bunk house to get a gun?" he asked.

The puncher stopped, shrugged his shoulders; and Brinnon added: "An' who's goin' inta the house?"

"I am!" Red declared. "I reckon I can go in there an' get property that belongs to me. It'll be the last time."

"Go ahead!" said Brinnon.

Red went into the house and got his gun. He was able to get it without encountering Sue. When he came out, he walked up to Ed and Warren.

"I'm goin' home," he said. "I'm goin' to stay there for two days. Then I'm ridin'. This job ain't finished yet, you know. Especial it ain't finished for you, Warren. The man that begun the whole business, the man that was really responsible for your father's death, is still livin'. I b'l'eve he's got other men by now. I'll just turn that main fella over to you if you get a chance at him. Otherwise I'll take him."

"I'm with you," Warren said.

"Me, I'm an officer of the law," Ed grinned. "I gotta go where dooty calls. I reckon you'll stir up some dooty for me, Red."

"How 'bout me?" the puncher asked.

"You? I can't kill you. I could do it. Mebbe you ain't worth killin'."

The three began to walk back toward a corral. They stopped dead when Brinnon spoke: "All right boys. Twenty o' you get horses. Ride where these three ride. Fight 'longside them."

"Sense has come to somebody," another puncher yelled. "I'm one o' the riders."

They grouped themselves and began to squabble as to who should ride. Red ran up to Brinnon and demanded: "Are you sending a bunch of men along with me and Ed and Warren?"

"Shore I am! My gosh, you've gone wild. You ain't in no fit shape to go huntin' Walters. You ain't in no fit shape to go huntin' nobody. Mebbe that wound o' yours has caused a fever. I never seen so insultin' a man in my time."

"Insultin'! These men has done their best to insult me today. Why, they been lookin' at me an' talkin' to me like I was a damn coward."

"Is that what's been botherin' you?" Brinnon asked.

"What else would?"

"Why, my good gosh, all these men wants is a chance to back you up when you hit Walters' trail. You ain't no giant, you know. Walters has got money. He can hire enough riff-raff to give all the men I got a fight. You know what they was sayin' among themselves this mornin'?"

"Er—no."

"They was sayin' that a fella can be too game. They was sayin' that when a man gets a getaway he don't know when to stop. They just wanta give you a hand. They ain't gonna get in your way. They'll ride behind you till it's necessary for them to ride up. You take that fella you was gonna shoot it out

with—why, he says: 'I'd ride to hell behind that fella.'" Brinnon raised his voice: "Hi, will you hellions quiet down for a minute."

They quieted and turned toward him. He beamed as he said: "They's a big bunch o'you an' on'y one me, but I have settled matters complete. Red was thinkin' you was all scornful because his wound made him kinda sickish."

The punchers stood and stared. They stared at Brinnon, they stared at Red. Then an oldish man went up to Brinnon and Red. He put a hand on Red's shoulder and said: "I've seen as much gunplay as the next. I mind the first time I got a bullet. It was in my shoulder. Kind of a bad wound but not fatal by no means. I laid in my bunk an' I laid in my bunk. I tol' the punchers I was gone. Well, the wound had been steamed an' liniment poured inta it. We had some good hot horse liniment in them days. It was clean as a whistle. I sh'd been on my horse, goin' about my business. But I thought I was a goner. That's the way she is with first wounds.

"Well, the boys was serious. The ol' man sent a fella ridin' for fifty miles to get a doctor. He took a look at me an' pulled the bandage off'n me. He slapped that wound good an' hard. Then he says to me: 'Get up, you lazy hound. You're on'y takin' a rest. There ain't nothin' the matter with you.' I got up an' went to work. Boy, you had a pretty fair nick in your arm. You got it last night. An, here this mornin' you're out here ready to use your gun on a innercent puncher. You oughta be ashamed of yourself for that.

'All us fellas wants is to see that you don't get a bullet where it'll send you to glory. Brinnon says you said you was gonna be the boss. You been the boss. You still are. What more do you want?"

"Well, who's gonna ride with me?" Red asked.

The squabble began again. Brinnon yelled the men into silence. He said: "Let Red pick his own men."

"Not me," Red said. "Them I left behind would folla me an' put a bullet into my back."

"You're damn right," a puncher declared.

The air was cleared. Brinnon went among the men and picked those who might ride. There was no objection from those who would be left behind. Brinnon's word was law.

Red returned to the house. Sue was in the kitchen. She asked: "How now?"

"Everybody's crazy," Red said, as he sank into a chair.

"I'll straighten you out after a while," she said. "Red, I know you must ride. Ride hard and fast and then come back. . . . . Have you been told what happened to Molliter and Blinky last night?"

"No."

"The punchers took them away.".

"The country *is* cleared now," Red said.

CHAPTER XVIII

ARRIVALS

RED was eager to start when two days had passed, but Brinnon prevailed upon him to wait one more. They left just at daybreak, twenty-three men in all. Red had been repeatedly assured that no one would get in his way. Red was not so keen about handling everything himself, since things had been completely ironed out with Brinnon. The old man had made an entire about face. He asserted that there was not a man in the country who could take Red's place in his favour.

Red had told Warren that he might have Walters if events shaped themselves that way, but he now regretted having said that. Warren was too young, and his grief lay upon him heavily. Red talked that over with Ed as they rode along, and Ed said he would put himself between Walters and Warren if that became necessary.

When the men arrived in town, they found the marshal marching up and down the sidewalk with a gun on each hip. He hurried toward them when he saw them approaching, and they stopped. The marshal, honest but incompetent because of his age, hastened up to Ed.

" What you mean by organizin' a posse an' tellin' me nothin' about it ? " he demanded.

" I ain't organized no posse," Ed retorted. " Anyhow I got a right to do it if I wanta."

" I'm the law enforcin' officer in this town."

" You work outa my office, don't you ? Oh, well, the posse's organized. No use in you an' me gettin' into a jam. Have you seen any strangers ? "

" Not one ! Ain't none been here. I been on the job."

" Not day an' night."

" I've had a man on while I got me some sleep."

" You boys wait here," Red said. " Whoever took the marshal's place might have got himself some sleep, too. I'm going to Mrs. Kerry's. I'll be right back."

All the men knew where Mrs. Kerry's was and who the woman was. Red saw dubious looks on their faces. He said: " All right. As many as like come along."

" Oh, I reckon it'll be all right," a puncher said. " If you ain't back soon, some o' us will be up there."

Red dismounted and went along the sidewalk, followed by the marshal's critical look. He did not need to knock on Mrs. Kerry's door. She opened it before he could lift a hand. She frowned at him, and he was astonished, for she had seemed to be his friend. However, she jerked back her head. and he

entered. She tiptoed to the door of the room from which she had emerged before, and he followed her. When they were in that room, she closed the door and stood with her back to it.

"You got men with you?" she asked.

"Plenty."

"Go get 'em. Eight men come here last night. I was gonna notify the marshal if you didn't show up today. He's so old he couldn't do nothin', but I s'pose he could have got help. Them men is tough."

"Where are they now?" Red asked.

"I heard them go out the back way this mornin'. I dunno if they've returned. I couldn't watch both back an' front, an' I knowed you'd come to the front."

"You'll have to get outa here, Mrs. Kerry," Red said. "We may have to do a little shootin'."

"I won't leave my house," she declared.

"Not for me?"

"That kinda talk don't make no impression on me, Red. I've lived a hard life an' it's been a fairly long life. You just go an' get your men. You couldn't have a better chance to line 'em up."

"You're a grand woman, Mrs. Kerry," Red said simply. "Will you stay in this room?"

"How many men you got?"

"Twenty-two besides myself."

"You think you're lookin' for these men?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, though I gotta make sure."

"Run along. I'll stay right here."

Red returned into the little parlour, closing the door behind him. Mrs. Kerry immediately opened the door. She said: "I'll stay here but I want a chance to peek out, to see what's goin' on."

Red decided to go into the hall, to have something more than a peek. He might find it advisable to have a look into the strangers' rooms. At the door into the hall he turned to Mrs. Kerry and raised his brows. She was quick. She pointed a finger toward the ceiling, and Red knew that the men were lodged in upper rooms.

He went into the hall and to the foot of the stairs. His eyes were lifted, and he at once saw a man standing up there. His garb differed from that of any garb Red had ever seen before. He wore a coat with tails. It was made of some rough material that Red knew nothing about. The pants were of the same material, Red noticed, and the vest was black with large yellow dots on it. Red didn't know what the hell the tie was, thought it was merely an ascot below a winged collar.

Damn if the fellow wasn't a dude. He was bare-headed, and Red wondered what his hat would have been like.

"Gambler, I reckon," Red said.

The man was flicking at his vest with a white hand.

Presently he touched his tie and then took hold of the lapels of his coat and shrugged his shoulders. Red guessed that he was ready to descend. He shore had made enough preparations, Red thought.

As he started down, he did not look farther than the step to which he dropped a foot. Red was totally unfamiliar with this strange animal. His guess that the man was a gambler was founded merely on the difference in dress. Gamblers, Red had known, had dressed in long black coats and wore black string ties.

But, though Red was unfamiliar with this animal, he was not unfamiliar with the actions of men. He expected this man to look clear down the stairs before he reached the bottom. That, he believed, would be natural. This man did not. He continued to let his gaze take in one step at a time.

"Mebbe you know I'm here, fella," Red told himself. "Mebbe you seen me come in. Well, let's see what your play is gonna be."

The man reached the next to the last step. He had betrayed himself by only one thing: As he had come on down he had bent his head. Red couldn't understand why he had done that. Hell, a man could take two-three steps down with his head straight up.

At last the man had to show that Red was there. He exhibited not the slightest surprise. He moved so that he might pass Red, but Red stepped in front of him. The man went still as rock. He looked at Red as if Red, in turn, were a strange animal. Red could play that game. He knew that the man wanted him to speak, and he decided not to do that if he had to stand there all day.

He wouldn't have to stand there all day. The men outside wouldn't wait long. They had waited for some time as it was.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Kerry," the man said.

"You thought you'd make me say somethin' first, didn't you?" Red said.

"I couldn't possibly be intrusted in anything you might say," the man stated.

"The hell you couldn't! My guess is that you're the boss o' the rest o' the men that's got rooms up there."

The man was, of course, above Red, and he was about Red's build. He suddenly grappled with Red and they fell against the wall. Red lost no time in abusing himself for not having covered the stranger. He started to fight. He got in two vicious blows to the man's ribs that made the man grunt. However, Red's hands had to be free to deliver those blows, and the man freed his own right hand and shot it up against Red's jaw. Red's hands went down momentarily, but he sidled away and evaded another blow. "Stand to one side, Red," came Mrs. Kerry's voice.

Red glanced at the door leading into the parlour. Mrs.

Kerry was standing in the doorway, and she had a shotgun in her hands. She pointed the shotgun at the stranger and he flattened himself against the wall.

"You'd better be good," said Mrs. Kerry. "What the hell you think you're pullin' off?"

"Why, Mrs. Kerry——" Red protested. "Such language! My good gosh——"

He leaned back against the wall and laughed. When he finished laughing, he laughed again. Mrs. Kerry took neither her eyes nor the shotgun from the stranger.

"I know," she said. "It's a dickens of a note for a gunman like you Red, to be pulled out of a jam by a woman like me, but you was in a worse jam than you thought you was. No, you. Don't you dast raise your hands."

"That's the usual procedure, isn't it?" the man asked.

"You do just what I tell you," Mrs. Kerry snapped. "First turn your back. Now push yourself up against the wall. Now push your arms clear down."

The man obeyed and Mrs. Kerry told Red to run his hands along the man's sleeves. The man said: "Redhead, if you touch me, I'll kill you later on. Keep your filthy hands off me."

The man could see neither Red nor Mrs. Kerry and Mrs. Kerry took one hand from the shotgun long enough to throw up a fist. Well, she shore was the boss here, Red admitted, and he put one hand, his left, on the man's shoulder and whirled him about. With his right hand he smashed him under the chin. The man dropped.

"I got a notion he's hidin' a coupla small guns in his sleeves, Red," said Mrs. Kerry.

Red searched the sleeves and found a gun hidden in each. The guns were fastened by rubber bands. Red could see how either could be drawn down, even after the man was supposed to have been disarmed. Red broke the bands and removed the guns. They were of the smallest calibre Red had ever seen, but he guessed that if one were pressed against a person's body or fired at very close range the effect would be deadly enough. Red took the guns into the parlour and put them on the table.

"That's a new one on me, Mrs. Kerry," he said.

"I've been all over the country, when my husband was alive and since he died. I've kep' roomin' houses and heaven knows what. I guess I've seen everything."

"I reckon you have. I reckon, too, you saved my life."

"Mebbe. Go get your men. Them other fellas won't be back for a while, I guess. You'll have a chance to work on this fella."

"Don't you never get afraid, Mrs. Kerry?" Red asked.

"Do you?"

"I guess that's the answer," Red said.

He went to the door and left it open when he had passed

through it. He could see the men down the street and he waved to them. They, of course, were watching this house and one waved. Red held up a finger, and the man who had waved sped his horse down to him.

Red briefly explained what had happened, and the puncher grinned. Red said : " Some o' you boys better get round to the back of the house an' the rest watch the front. I wanta talk to that fella when he comes to, an' I don't think that'll be long."

The man nodded and rode back. Red went into the house. The man was stirring a little, and Red picked him up and carried him into the parlour. He put him into a chair and held him there till he lifted his head.

" I'm gonna let go of you," Red said. " Don't fall—or fall if you wanta."

Mrs. Kerry had put her shotgun in a corner, and now that her job was done, she sat down and folded her hands in her lap. By gosh, Red declared, there was a woman who had lived. She could go into action or she could take it easy. Red stepped around in front of the man and saw that he was looking at Mrs. Kerry with somewhat clouded eyes.

Then there was a knock at the outer door. Red knew that no one could have knocked at the door with those punchers out there unless it were safe for him to do so, and he let Mrs. Kerry answer the summons. The thin high voice of the marshal came to Red. He demanded admittance. Red expected Mrs. Kerry to tell him to go about his business, but then Ed spoke.

" Just let us come in, Mrs. Kerry. We won't make no fuss."

Mrs. Kerry stepped back, and Ed and the marshal came into the room. The marshal immediately wanted to know what the trouble was. The man opened his lips to speak, but Red hushed him, emphasizing his order with a pointed gun.

" Let things ride, Marshal," Ed said.

" I won't——"

" Eight men come here an' you or the man that was takin' your place didn't see 'em, Marshal," said Red.

" Is that right ? " the marshal piped.

" They come in the back way, I reckon," said Red, to let the old fellow down.

" I couldn't watch front an' back," the marshal declared. " Well, let's get to work on him."

" What's your name, fella ? " Red inquired.

" I'll answer to the marshal."

" You can answer to me, too," Ed put in. " I'm the Justice of the Peace."

" I was going to look you up," the man stated, " you and the marshal or the constable or the sheriff or whatever. I want the aid of the law."

" The name," said Red.

" Walters."

CHAPTER XIX

CLEAR AGAIN

THE MARSHAL's dulled intelligence did not enable him to catch the significance of the name the man gave, but both Red and Ed snatched at it. They laughed.

"You ain't Walters," Red declared.

The man proved himself fast enough, too. He saw that he could hope for nothing from the marshal, and he turned to Ed.

"If you are the justice of the peace, keep this fellow out of it while I talk to you," he said.

"I'll keep out," said Red cheerfully. "Take him over, Ed."

"You *are* the justice of the peace?" the man asked.

"Well, for the last few days I been the justice part of the time, an' part of the time I been plain puncher. I can be the justice here for a while, I reckon."

"My name *is* Walters," the man went on. "I am full brother to the Walters whom a man named Brinnon ran out of the country. When that happened, my brother sent for me. He knew that I was capable of helping him out of any jam."

"What you want the marshal to do?" Ed asked.

"I want to swear to a warrant for the arrest of this Brinnon." Walters proceeded. "I would swear to that warrant before you, and the marshal would have to serve it."

The marshal had got himself together, and he seemed fully to comprehend what was going to be required of him. He became choleric.

"You don't get me to serve no warrant on Brinnon," he declared. "Why, Brinnon ain't no crim'nal. I've knowed him since we was boys."

"How about you, Mr. Justice?" the man asked.

"What good would it do for me to give you a warrant if the marshal wouldn't serve it?" Ed asked.

"You could serve it yourself."

"Not on Brinnon in the state o' mind he's in just now. Besides twenty of Brinnon's men is outside. They wouldn't let me make a move toward Brinnon. You come here at the wrong time, mister."

Red, having nothing else to do, had been watching the man closely. At Ed's disclosure he saw him open and close his slender hands once. Then he became as still a man as Red had ever seen.

"Brinnon's men bein' here don't set so well does it?" Red asked.

The man gave Red a slow look, his mouth tight and his eyes half closed. Then he returned to Ed.

Those two pistols on the table are mine," he said. "I'll just take them and leave. I see there's no law here."

"Marshal," said Red, "this fella had them two little guns up his sleeves. They's seven other men some place in town or near-by. You better take them guns."

The marshal liked to be considered a man of action. He took up the guns and put them into his pockets. Ed said: "We better go outside, Marshal. They's seven other men to be looked after."

"Come on," the marshal said. "Starling, keep your eye on this fella. I'm kinda suspicious of him."

"You can't hold me without accusing me of something," the man declared.

"I've held better men for twenty-four hours 'thout nary charge. If I was you, I wouldn't fool with Starling. He's bad."

The marshal had no knowledge of Red's ever having been "bad." His statement was only his way of leaving a warning. He and Ed went outside.

"So you're Starling, are you?" the man asked Red.

"Fella, you're smooth," Red said. "Least you think you are. That's all right with me, but I ain't got no use for your kind. I'm Starling and if you make one move I don't like I'll blow your heart out."

The man considered that for a while. Mrs. Kerry rose and yawned. Then she took up the shotgun. She aimed it at the man.

"You're hidin' somethin', mister," she said. "I don't know what kind of a crook you are but I'm gonna find out. For one thing your name ain't Walters. I knowed you was lyin' when you said it was. I don't care what your name is, but you're gonna tell me what your business here is. Talk fast!"

"Madam, you wouldn't dare shoot me," the man stated.

"Wouldn't I? Well, I can see you're strange to this country. In this country no man goes back of a woman's word. If I just blowed you to pieces an' tol' *any* man that I done it because you made a move toward me, why, even the ol' marshal would on'y go an' buy himself a drink. All Red Starling would have to say would be just nothin' at all, for nobody would ask him a question. What's your business?"

"I'm a gambler."

"Where?"

"In St. Louis. I have a string of places over in that country."

"Your name ain't Walters? You ain't no brother of the Walters that has a ranch hereabouts?"

"No."

"Then why did you come over here?"

"Walters asked me to."

"You thought you'd get ol' Brinnon arrested?"

"Yes."

"Red Starling, take the fella off'n my hands," Mrs. Kerry

cried. She sat down and held the shotgun on her knees. The man turned in his seat and faced Red. Red sat staring into his eyes for a long time, but he could not stare him down. At last Red nodded.

"I know," Red then said. "You're a gunman. All them fine clothes you wear is a disguise. You ain't no gambler. You wouldn't gamble on nothin', not even on a shore thing. Walters hired you to come over here an' kill Brinnon. Walters knowed that everything had gone wrong. Well, everything has. Of the men Walters sent over here, not one is left. You an' the seven you got with you won't be left long. Where are them men ?"

"I don't know. They rode off somewhere early this morning. You say I won't gamble. I'll gamble with you."

"I know you're plenty fast, but I'll take you on."

Red was aware that those white, supple hands could handle a gun with astonishing rapidity, but he was not concerned about that. He believed his safety lay in the fact that the man was a city killer. Where and how he had become acquainted with Walters was of no moment. One thing Red was sure of. This killer could not handle a forty-five six gun !

"Would those men outside permit me to leave if I killed you ?" the man asked.

"I could fix that."

The man rose with some such movement as a cat would have made. He said : "I'll just go upstairs and get a gun. You and the lady, too, may accompany me."

"You don't need to go upstairs," Red said. "I got two guns on me, as you can see."

"Oh," the man sneered, "that kind of clumsy gun ?"

"It's the on'y kind you get to use."

The man sat down suddenly, and Mrs. Kerry laughed and said : "Red Starling, you're cute. You figgered that fella right down to the end of one of his white fingers. Now, you go right ahead and get what you want from him."

"Where'd you meet Walters ?" Red asked.

"Twenty miles north of here in the house he's living in."

"How many men has he got around that house ?"

"I went there in the night. There were many guards."

"Big house ?"

"I should say it has twenty rooms. Walters told me it had been built by an Eastern man who thought he would like to live in this country and then changed his mind."

"Tell me how to get there."

The man told him in detail, and Red went on : "Now about yourself. Where are you wanted ?"

"I——" He hesitated and found himself covered with the shotgun and Red's short gun. "In a number of places," he said.

"For murder ?"

"Well, yes."

"You can come outside with me."

"I can tell you about the seven men who are riding somewhere," the man said.

"Somewhere, yeh," Red jeered. "To hell with it."

He took the man outside and punchers who were guarding the front of the rooming house immediately surged forward afoot. Red told them what there was to tell. Red had been watching his prisoner and had seen that he was making a desperate effort to keep his head up. As Red finished, however, the man swayed a little and his head drooped. He was very pale, and his shapely hands trembled. The punchers were silent, cold.

The marshal had been standing in front of the punchers, and he now went up to Red and the man.

"You through with him, Starling?" the marshal asked.

"All through," Red smiled.

His smile was due partly to the marshal's intended exercise of authority and partly to the fact that the man was near collapse. He seemed to sense the situation more quickly and fully than the old officer did.

"Watcha grinnin' at?" the marshal queried, peering up at Red.

Red said nothing, and the marshal laid a hand on the man's arm. He said: "You can come with me. I'm gonna hold you for a while till these punchers get out of town. Then I'll lock you up after you've had a hearin' before the justice of the peace."

"I don't think I'll be here," Ed said.

"You gotta be here."

"Not me! Fact is, I'm quittin' my job permanent. I'm goin' back to punchin' cows just as soon as Red Starling says I can."

"Red Starling ain't runnin' this town," the marshal said.

"Mebbe not. But if he ain't I dunno who is. If you are, you can go about your business with this fella."

There was a stir among the punchers. Two stepped up to the marshal. He yelled: "Keep back. This man is my prisoner."

Red had known all along what the punchers would do, and the thing they would do was the thing he would do if he had been here alone with this hired gunman. He had to take the responsibility. He could not stand back and permit the punchers to assume it. He joined those two punchers.

"Fella," he ordered, "step along with me."

The marshal, having thought he had the situation in hand, lost his temper again. He put his gun on Red. One of the punchers, afraid he might, in his excitement, shoot Red, snatched the gun from his hand. Keeping his eyes on the gun as the puncher held it in his hand, the marshal withdrew to a

safe distance. No one had to tell him what the temper of this outfit was, and he felt that he had done his duty.

" Get out in the street, you," one of the punchers told the man.

" Starling, you're in charge," the man protested. " Are you going to let me be hanged ? "

" I'm gonna help hang you," Red assured him. " You come here to help kill Brinnon. You hired your gun to a man that seems to have lost his head complete."

" If you had suffered the indignity that Walters suffered at Brinnon's hands ——"

" You're talkin' way up above my head," Red said. " Do what you're told. I see a coupla fellas out there gettin' ropes. You don't wanta be dragged, do you ? "

The man moved out into the middle of the street. He was facing the sun, but he seemed not to know it. He stood looking into it, and Red guessed that he was having to use all his strength to keep to his feet.

Red and the two punchers moved around the others. They got their horses and rode up behind the man.

"Move on," Red ordered.

" Hi, Red," a ribald puncher called, " bring back that fella's necktie to me. I ain't seen a necktie like that in all my lifetime. I don't wanta wear the thing. I just want to nail it to the bunkhouse wall."

Red gave him a look which silenced him.

The man moved on, on leaden feet. When the few buildings of the little town were passed, Red, in a low voice, ordered the man to turn off. This, again, was a new experience for him. He had never before put hand to rope.

Both the punchers had done that, and on two occasions they had helped to hang a man whose kind they knew, a cow country killer. What kind of life this man lived when he was in his own environment they had not the least idea. They could not understand why he wore the clothes he wore. Why his hands and his face were white. A fella without overalls and chaps was a queer piece of work. His pallor showed that he kept himself shut away from the sun. He did that intentionally, for, a few moments ago, he had been a free man. He might have been high-tailing it any place. The little party came to trees presently, their destination.

" Far as we go, stranger," said one of the punchers.

The man stopped and faced about. Agony twisted his face, and despair darkened his eyes. " Men," he pleaded, " don't ! Don't hang me. It's a dog's death." He suddenly dropped to his knees and extended his white hands. " Don't," he said again, in a barely audible voice.

All three men were looking at him, and sweat came out on their faces. Suddenly one of the punchers whipped out his gun and turned his head. Red knew that a crying out to

him would be useless. This man must die, and it was not in the hearts of any of them to string him up. He would struggle, he would beg.

The shot which the puncher fired was an act of mercy.

The puncher wheeled his horse without looking at his target. He had no need to look. He had been sure where that bullet was going.

Both Red and the other puncher knew that silence was important. They could guess what the first puncher's emotions were.

The three returned to the waiting punchers. None of those asked a question. They assumed that the job had been done with a rope, and it was not a matter for discussion. The marshal was not in sight. He was, in fact, having a drink in a nearby saloon. He hoped those damned punchers would get out of his bailiwick before long.

Those damned punchers had to await the coming of night before they departed, however. There were those seven men to be dealt with. The punchers had to place their horses where the arriving men would not see them, for a band of horses in the street or behind any building would excite suspicion.

It was at last decided that five punchers should take the horses along the road in the direction in which the punchers would travel after a while. That would leave plenty of men here.

Red thought of Mrs. Kerry. He went into the rooming house and found her in the parlour. He said : " Mrs. Kerry, we got rid of that fella. You'll have to get out of here. There's goin' to be a battle after dark."

" I'm stayin' in my own house," she declared. "I ain't never been drove out of any place I've lived, an' I don't aim to be drove out now. I'll go upstairs, though. I got a coupla shot guns, Red. You bring along that shotgun. Never carry a shotgun, or even a rifle, when you're carryin' anything else."

" Some of them men may break in here," Red warned.

" An' some of them that breaks in will be sorry they done it. The back door is locked now, Red. You just lock the front one an' put a match to the wick of that hangin' lamp. When them fellas comes back, they'll find one light and two locked doors. They'll be stopped long enough for you an' your boys to blow the daylights outa them. What more you want ? "

" Not a thing."

" An' Red, don't give one thought to me. Keep your mind on your job. That's the way to do things like this. When them fellas show up, just tie into them fast. Don't show them no mercy."

Red lighted the lamp. It was only late afternoon and the light made no impression on the light of the day. It would be

clear enough when darkness came, however, for Red noticed that the chimney shone. Mrs. Kerry was no sloven. "Now lock the door, Red," Mrs. Kerry said.

"If I do, how'll I get out?" Red asked.

"I was testin' you, Red. Your mind is workin' all right. You'll come through all right. Go on! I'll lock the door behind you."

Red opened the door. He said: "Mrs. Kerry, no matter what happens, I'll see that no harm comes to you."

She stood looking at him absently. Then her somewhat weary eyes brightened. "That'll be nice, Red," she declared. "It's been a long time since anybody looked after me. Get goin', boy!"

Red passed through the door and stood on the step till he heard the lock click. He had never thought about Mrs. Kerry before. He guessed you had to get acquainted with people to think about them, one way or the other. She led one hell of a life, he asserted, but she led it bravely. She was a good Western woman, and if anybody thought otherwise, let him speak his piece to Red Starling.

He reported the situation in the house to the other men, and they received the news indifferently.

The men had their suppers and then stood in groups on the board walk, waiting. They believed those men would arrive in the darkness between twilight and moonrise.

Presently the sun set.

CHAPTER XX

On Their Way

PLACING THE MEN offered no difficulties. Between the rooming house and the next building there was a space of fifteen feet. As soon as the twilight passed, darkness filled that space. Red was sure that it would be filling it when those men returned. He placed half of the men at the front corner of the next building, so that they should see anyone seeking entrance by the front way of the rooming house and half at the rear corner so that they should be in a similar position there.

Then he went round the rooming house. Through a far window he could see the lamp's light. There was no light from any upstairs window, however. He could imagine Mrs. Kerry sitting up there with her guns, calmly awaiting whatever was to happen.

He stopped with the men in the rear, for he believed the oncoming men would not go into the street. He wanted to be in on the initial attack. Ed was out in front, but young Warren was here. He had seemed to be where Red was.

The eyes of all the men were out on the flat. Suddenly young Warren uttered an exclamation. Red said quietly, to quiet the boy: "Easy, son. I reckon we all see him."

No one asked what Red referred to, and he was sure that the man approaching on foot had been picked up by every one. Red damned the man on foot. He might be a townsman returning home. If he were one of the expected men, he should ride in and he should not come alone. Red did not think any of those men had nerve to come here alone after an absence of an entire day.

However, all these men crowded back so that they were not visible. When the walking man was within twenty feet of the door, he stopped. He looked all about and then up at the wall of the rooming house. He appeared puzzled, but what puzzled him Red could not guess. The simple fact was that he had expected to find a light somewhere in the rear of the house and had found none.

He soon went up to the rear door, and Red supposed he pressed the latch. Naturally the door did not give. He stood looking up at the wall above him.

Red said nothing, but moved out of the darkness and toward the man. None of the punchers objected. They seemed to decide that one man should be able to take care of a single crook.

The soil beneath Red's feet was sandy and he was able to move out and up behind the man without his hearing him. He stood ten feet behind him and waited. He heard the latch pressed again. The result was the same, of course, and the man turned. He caught sight of Red.

"I got a gun on you," Red said. "Stick up your hands."

The result was, for a few seconds, unpredictable. Red feared the man would take a chance with him. Red would have to shoot him if he went for his gun. There was no way of telling how far off the other men were. The sound of a shot might set them into flight.

But the man could apparently see the glimmer of the gun in Red's right hand. His own hands shot up and Red slowly walked in on him and made him turn his back. Red took his gun and then forced him over to where the other men were.

"Quick!" Red said. "Where's your sidekickers?"

"I ain't got——"

The punchers were in no mood for trifling. As many as could crowded up to the man and he felt metal in his ribs.

"They're out on the flat half a mile," he said. "They're waitin' to be told whether anybody is here or not. Who you fellas? You from Walters?"

Another stupid man, Red said, and he did not waste breath in answering the question. The situation was ticklish. The punchers had no horses here. If this man did not return, those

men on the flat would be warned and flee. They would have to be hunted down after a delay.

"What was you gonna do?" Red demanded.

'Nothin'."

"What you mean, nothin'?"

"Why, them fellas will come in 'less I go back pretty soon. You see, I'm afoot an' they got horses. It's so still a night that they can hear any gun firin' from here."

Red and the other men breathed sighs of relief. Apparently all they had to do was to wait the coming of the men. Yet Red wasn't satisfied. "How'd they know you wouldn't be took without no firin'?"

"Oh, they're sure nothin' will happen to me. All I hadda do was to get into the roomin' house an' see that everything was in order. We was all comin' in but the boss said it might be as well for one of us to have a look. In a house like this people is comin' an' goin' all the time. The boss was sure all I'd have to do would be to walk in an' stay there."

"What you fellas think of the story?" Red asked.

"Sounds all right to me," Ed said, and several of the other men murmured agreement.

"Warren," said Red, to give that youngster something to do, "take charge of this fella. Lead him along the buildin' for a little way. Don't let him get away from you."

"He won't get away from me," Warren declared.

He led the man along the wall of the building. Red, Ed, and the punchers again waited.

"More men afoot," Red suddenly said. "What in hell does that mean?"

"They're plannin' to ride right away, I'm thinkin'," Ed answered. "They've left their horses out on the flat. Mebbe brought 'em in a little ways."

"Can anybody make out how many there are o' them fellas?" Red asked.

Nobody could make out the number for the men were walking close together. There were, however, not a large number. They came on till they must have been able to see the rear of the house plainly enough. Then suddenly they stopped.

"They can't pick up that fella an' they don't know what to do," Red said. "Hold it for a minute."

The men out there might have continued to be puzzled, but that did not prevent them from acting. They suddenly turned and took to their heels. They could not run fast, however, and since no one man cared what happened to another they were a confused bunch for the first few seconds. Then they spread out. "If they get to their horses, they'll escape," Red pointed out calmly.

He knew that the punchers would not let the men escape and he was the first to move. He stepped along the rear wall of the rooming house and half a dozen punchers followed him.

All the men fired at those running men. Only one was left. He continued to run. Red brought him down with a single well-aimed shot.

Red did not know whether the men's horses had been tied with dropped reins or whether other men had been left with them, and he started to run in the direction in which he supposed the horses to have been left. Punchers, understanding what was in his mind, ran after him.

The first sound they heard was a rush of hoofs. The sound increased.

"Look out," Red yelled. "Them horses is comin' this way." He looked back. "An' the rest of our boys is comin' after us. I hope to Gawd they'll know it's us."

"I'll take care o' that," a puncher yelled back, and Red saw him stop.

Red had no time to look back to see whether the other punchers were intercepted, but he was sure they were, for there were no shots, as there would have been if those pursuing punchers had thought the running men were those who had been expected.

These punchers and Red had to stop as the horses bore down upon them. The horses caught sight of them and veered off. The reins of each horse were fastened to the horn, and Red knew that they had not been tied. No rider was on any horse's back. Therefore someone must have been with the animals.

As soon as the horses were gone, the men ran on. They came to the men who had been shot down. They lay close together and Red ran his eyes over them.

He was so close that he was able to see a gun lifted from the ground. It was so dark that he could not see the hand. The gun seemed to be coming up of its own accord. Red could not cry out a warning to the gunman who was trying to get in a last shot. He could only empty his gun a little away from the other, the rising, gun. That gun fell, and Red knew that his bullets had found a mark. He had had to slow down in his running as he fired, and the other men were beyond him.

He sped on, leaping over a still body that was suddenly before him darkly. It was, he supposed, the body of the gunman in whom a little vicious life had remained.

Two guns cracked somewhere beyond the men. A puncher stopped dead still. Red saw him whirl and fall. Red had to stop altogether now. There was no life in the puncher when he stopped to examine him, and he lifted himself and again started after the other men.

The moon edged over the flat horizon.

Two men were running away. Their heads were turned over their shoulders, and Red knew that their eyes were wide from fear. Inevitably they caught sight of their pursuers, and they threw up their hands.

It was a pitifully inadequate movement. Once more Red

stopped. Dealing with those killers was not his business. It was the business of the punchers. The two killers ran for only a few steps. When they halted, the punchers did so, too. The punchers stood eyeing the pair.

"Wait!" Red called.

He hastened up to the punchers and informed them of what had happened to that one boy back there. The result was only increased stillness among the punchers. Red retreated a little way and stood watching.

It was almost as if the punchers were going to spare the lives of those two, so long they regarded them. The two seemed to pick up a little hope, though if they had not been so excited they must have known how groundless such hope was.

"Can we come up to you?" one called. "We can explain. We was just watchin' the horses. We ain't done nothin'."

No; they had done nothing, Red reflected. They had only killed a boy who had never lifted a hand against any one except to right a wrong.

"Stand apart," a puncher suddenly said.

The two seemed to understand what that meant. However, one quickly stepped away from the other. Both went for their guns. The blasts from the punchers' guns shattered the silence of the peaceful night. The two could not keep their feet even for a fraction of a second. They gave Red the impression of having been blown backward. The punchers reloaded their guns, and then went among the men on the ground and made sure that all were dead. At last two picked up the body of the punchers and all the men retraced their steps.

There was no one in the street as they emerged into it. The firing had been heard, of course, but no one was over eager to see what caused it till a report came in naturally.

Red went along the rooming house and found young Warren still guarding his prisoner. Red said: "This fella is a killer. I'll just take him out on the flat."

"I'll take him out on the flat myself," Warren said.

'You ain't never been in a thing like this," Red said. Hadn't you better let me do it?"

"Should I give him a chance?" Warren asked.

"Oh, don't monkey with him. We ain't got time. He wouldn't give you a chance."

Warren made the man turn about so that he faced the flat. He then forced him to march straight ahead. Red watched them in the moonlight. He expected Warren to get rid of the man, but he saw the two stand back to back and start to walk away from each other. Red was convinced that that killer had a gun in his hand. Probably, in the excitement, Warren had taken the man out behind the rooming house and got the gun which Red had made the killer get rid of.

Red knew that in a split second Warren might be dead. He

and the killer had arranged that they should turn together, but the killer would not keep his word. He would wheel and put a bullet into Warren's back and then attempt to flee.

Red raised his gun to fire. At the same instant Warren and the gunman turned. There were twin flashes. Red leaned forward, his heart pounding. Then he straightened up. There was nothing to worry about. Warren was still on his feet, and the other man was down. Warren came in to Red.

"That fella thought *I* thought he'd take the twenty paces we agreed on," the boy said. "I knew he wouldn't."

"Good thing you didn't take one more step," said Red, as if indifferently.

"I outguessed him."

They went out into the street and found that the punchers were gathered together farther down. They joined them and found that they were in front of the office of the justice of the peace and the marshal.

"The marshal has agreed to close the office for the time bein'," Ed said, "so we have to put that boy's body in there. We're gonna leave a puncher to guard it. No more Walters' men is comin' this way, that's sure."

Red said to young Warren: "You've done your part. Will you stay with that boy's body? He was killed in the fight we had."

"I can't," said Warren. "We're gonna ride in on Walters. If it hadn't been for Walters, my father would still be alive."

"All right," Red said. "'Course, Walters didn't know what he was startin'. A man never does."

It was arranged that one of the punchers should remain with the body. If Red and the other men were not back soon, the body would be taken to the Brinnon ranch for burial. The last that Red saw of the interior of the justice's office was that young body stretched on a table with a puncher sitting beside it. Red knew that that puncher would sit there hour upon hour motionless.

Well, Walters would die now. He would get no chance. Every man here was ready to shoot him down the moment he ran into him. "I guess we better go to where the horses are," Red said.

"Marshal," said Ed, "you better go about gettin' another justice. I'm done."

They had to walk some distance before they came upon the horses and the men guarding them. The men reported that they had seen a band of horses, unmounted, running off across the flat. A few words were enough to inform them of what had happened.

The horses were rested and had fed upon the scant grass which grew on the flat. At the end of five miles the riders came to a creek and the water was welcome to the animals and to the men.

As he mounted, to take the lead since he knew just what trails to follow, Red noticed that Warren was just behind him, with Ed at his side. Red thought the boy was unaware of Ed's presence, his mind seeming to be wholly occupied with his own intention of killing Walters.

They were able to keep to a good pace, and Red judged that, at a little past midnight, they could not be more than two miles or so from that big, strange house which the dude killer had spoken of. Red called a halt.

" The house where Walters is holed up is guarded heavy," he said. " Question is has Walters got guards on'y there. He might have some throwed out even this far. The sucker has got plenty money, an' he seems to be picking up all the riff-raff he can find."

" There's a town off to the west about a mile," Ed said. " Well, it can't hardly be called a town. On'y a saloon, a general store, an' two houses as I remember it. It's right at the edge of the desert. We might pick up somethin' over there."

" Walters wouldn't have no guards over there," Red objected. " He'd know that if any body come, it'd be straight from the south."

" You thinkin' them fellas gives a damn about Walters?" Ed demanded. " You can bet they know where saloons is if they know anything about this country. If they had been put out on this road, they'd head for that saloon soon after dark come."

" We can go over there," Red yielded.

They followed Ed in a semicircle as he headed for the town and soon they were within sight of the few buildings but well off the trail.

" You see a light, don't you?" Red asked.

" Yeh," Ed answered.

" Well, that place ain't gen'ally staying open at this hour. Hell, there ain't hardly no business there in the daytime. I guess the proprietor must be his own best customer."

" You know I been around here a lot, Ed," Warren put in. " I guess I ain't worked as much as I shoulda done. This place started out to be a boom town. There's a creek just beyond them buildings. Somebody picked up a little gold there, an' there was a rush. For a while there was plenty tents an', o' course, a saloon. Two houses was built. Nobody lives in them now. I don't b'l'eve even the store is open. The saloon keeper will hang on as he can, an' then the place'll be a little ghost town. It won't be the on'y one in this country.

" Then it's sure," said Red, " that somebody besides the saloon keeper is over there."

" 'Less he's so lonesome he goes to bed with a light burnin'," Ed said. " Well, what now, fella?"

" Why, we'll just ride up to the front door," Red said.

That was the mood of all the men, and they were soon at the

front door. Inescapably their arrival was heard inside, but, in their opinion, that amounted to exactly nothing. They sat their horses, listening, but no sound came to them. The building was of logs taken from along the creek which had failed to yield riches, and only the door broke the logs' solidity.

The men could see each other plainly, and Red held up a hand. Then he dismounted and moved among the men. The result was that all the horses were presently withdrawn from in front of the door and a dozen men with guns pointed at it were in front of it.

Red walked up to the door. He intended to throw it open and step aside, so that the dozen men should be ready to pour lead inside if there should be hostile move from anyone there.

The heavy door went back more quickly than he had expected, and he found himself in the doorway, with his gun aimed at several men strung along the bar. Their faces were turned toward Red.

" Red, get back !" one of the dozen punchers yelled.

CHAPTER XXI

Just a Chance

Red did not leap aside. He was held by the actions of those men, whom he quickly made out to be only five. The one nearest Red remained where he was. The man beyond him stepped out a foot, and the others moved out similarly, so that they were all within range of Red's gun. Then, grinning, they put up their hands.

" Come on in," one called. " You won't get nothin' outa us, an' I don't b'l'eve you'll get much outa this saloon keeper. He says we're the first customers he's had in four days."

Red stepped into the room, and the dozen punchers rushed up to the door. They followed Red in by twos and lined up against the wall opposite those with upward arms.

Red looked the men over. They were young, not a man among them, Red decided, being more than twenty-five, and most appeared younger than that. If they were crooks, they were the merriest bunch of crooks that Red had so far met. They seemed to have had a few drinks apiece, but none was drunk. Red's final opinion was that they were genuine punchers.

" Sorry," Red said, " but I'll have to ask you who you are and where you're from."

" Aw, come up an' have a drink," one of the men invited. " We ain't harmin' nobody. You seem to be lookin' for somebody but it can't be us."

" I guess you're all right," said Red, " but a few things will

have to be cleared up. We're on the trail of a bunch of killers. We ain't got no time for foolin'."

The men's gay mood swiftly passed. The first man turned and stared at his fellows and they stared back at him. Then that man let his rather dazed eyes drift to Red.

" Say, there's somethin' doin' in this man's country. Come up an' take our guns, an' mebbe we can tell you somethin'."

" Never mind about your guns. You can't use them 'less you want to be slaughtered. You can put down your hands an' step out here."

The men walked up to Red. The one man said : " We're punchers from a ranch up the creek a ways. We been savin' our wages for three months to come to this here place. We're gonna pan for gold. 'Course, it's on'y a chance, but if we don't find no gold we'll be no worse off than we woulda been if we hadn't saved the money. If we hadn't decided to come here, we'd have spent it in our town anyways. We can go back to work any time. Well, who're you ? "

Red, watching all the men closely, explained who he, the men here, and the men outside were. The spokesman only said : " Glad to meetcha."

" They're all right, Red," said one of the punchers against the wall. " All's wrong with them is they're playin' a crazy game."

" Ain't so crazy," declared the other. " Hell, we can hole up here for some time. If we can't find no gold, we can have some hot poker games, an' we'll be nearer a drink every night than we ever been in our lives before."

" What'd you think you might tell us ?" Red asked.

The man was looking at the open door and Red turned his head. The remaining men were standing just beyond the door, looking in. They were plainly visible in the moonlight.

" Mebbe all you fellas is hooked up with them we seen at the big house this afternoon," the spokesman said.

" Was you in that house ?" Red asked.

" In it ? Hell, no. Tell you : We had heard that that house was empty, that the crazy falla that had it built—an' buildin' it took time, I'm sayin'—had gone back to the East where he come from. We was gonna camp out in it an' try for gold along the creek daytimes. We figgered with no rent to pay we could stay there till next spring, even if we didn't find no gold."

" You youngsters was simply out for a good time," Red said.

" Mebbe that's the truth. Well, that house stands on a kind of a hill, y'know. Didn't look like nobody was livin' in it. Not a sign of life around it. We rode up the slope. We got to the top, an' damn if a fella didn't rise up from nowhere. He had a gun in each hand, an', fella, he was hard. He looked hard, I mean. When he spoke to us, his voice was kinda drawly. You never can tell about a drawly voice. You can

drawl out a death message just as easy as you can drawl out a sweet invitation.

"'Where did you boys think you was goin'?' says this hombre.

"I was nearest to him, an' I says to him: 'Why, stranger, we're goin' right back down that slope an' we ain't never comin' up it again.'

"He says: 'That would be a mighty good idea, but I reckon you'll have to get a pass to do that.'

"I asked him why, and before he could answer, half a dozen fellas come around the corner of the house. That house, y'know, is about a mile or so long, but she ain't so wide."

"One story?" Red asked.

"Mostly one story. But at the—lemme see—yeh, the east end she's two stories. Looks like they was mebbe one big or a coupla small rooms in that two-story end. Y'know, the place was built by a fella that was worried in his soul. Story was he had separated from his wife an' was gonna spend the rest of his life in the wilderness. Why he wanted so much room in the wilderness, I dunno. Some say he got together with his wife, an' couldn't get home fast enough. Others had got a better explanation. 'They say he just built the place for a huntin' lodge an' will be back here next winter with a big bunch o' tenderfoots."

"What'd the men that come around the corner of the house do?" Red asked.

"Y'know, them fellas s'prised me. I thought that one fella had been left behind to watch the place. He don't belong in this country. I know that. But them others shore do. An' if they ain't a pack o' bad hombres, I'll nibble the rim off'n my hat. They didn't come up to us an' look us over as a bunch o' watchmen would do. They glared at us.

"'Well?' one says.

"I got as good a temper as any man, but I didn't have no trouble holdin' it down. I says: 'Why we was lookin' for a drink o' water.' Then I coulda bit my tongue off. My gosh, they's plenty creeks, includin' this big one here. But that fella didn't seem to notice. He says: 'Then what?'

"'Why,' I says, 'we're punchers turned prospectors. We're lookin' for a little town on the creek. We got pans an' everything to pan gold with. We're gonna camp out for a few months—an' drink some liquor.'

"Well, them fellas looked from one to another an' then one fella says: 'Too few.' I didn't know what he meant by that. The other fella seemed kinda quick. He says to me: 'You know how to get to that little town?' I tol' him we didn't exactly, though we did; an' he says he'd send some men with us so we wouldn't lose our way. He sent ten men. We unloaded our stuff here while they watched. Then they rode off. An' here we are."

"Fella, put out that light," Red ordered.

"What for?"

The spokesman had caught Red's sharp tone, and he repeated the order. The saloon keeper put out the light.

"Everybody outside," Red said.

"Watcha think you're gonna do?" asked one of the strangers who had hitherto not spoken.

"Hurry up, you damn fool," said the other. "Think he'd let us have our guns with the light out if he wasn't trustin' us?"

"Guess that's right."

All the men, including the saloon keeper, got through the door as speedily as possible. Red took only an instant to look around. This group of buildings was at the edge of the timber country, and there were innumerable trees along the creek and for some distance back from it.

"You boys run for them trees over yonder," Red said. "Hide yourselves. We gotta get our horses out of the way."

The men ran and disappeared among the trees. Red and the other men mounted and rode past the trees and for some distance beyond them. There they left their horses and returned to the men. The moon was high now, and every object was distinctly visible. If anyone came from the long house, he would approach the trees from the northwest, but Red knew that the approach might be made from any direction.

He was sure someone would come, and he was astonished that the visit had been so long delayed. He overlooked the fact that, if these men had been accepted as genuine, the men at the house would know that they would stay up late once they were inside a saloon with nothing to waken them early.

Red called the five men to him and told them what he thought necessary. That spokesman said firmly: "Hell, we're with you. Some o' them Walters men killed a puncher, huh?"

Red had not omitted mention of the puncher. He knew that these punchers would be more stirred by that than by anything else.

"You're free to go, if you wanta," Red said.

"Go!"

The word was scornfully spoken, and that was that. Red asked where the men's horses were, and the answer was that they were in a grassy clearing up the creek.

"Rope corral," the man explained. "They'll stay put. Nice little place for horses."

Red knew that he had some allies and that he might need them. There was no way of telling how many ruffians were now at the long house. Walters, however, had waited too long. He would have to be stopped. If he were not, he would continue to send men to Brinnon's country till he got Brinnon.

"Well," Red said, "we better get lined up."

He divided the men and placed them among the trees so that all avenues of approach could be guarded. He had been vaguely puzzled by the fact that no one had come up to this hour. Ordinarily he would have expected arrivals around midnight. Somebody in Walters' outfit must be smart. He didn't think that person was Walters himself. Walters had acted like a fool. He had trusted men whom no one except a fool would trust. Red finally guessed that anger had so ruled the man that he had lost his head completely.

Then whoever in the outfit was smart hadn't been consulted about the various moves that Walters had made or he had joined up only recently. Let him be smart ! Red's only hope was that some of Walters' men would come here, so that they could be knocked off and thus cut down the number that Walters could use at the finish.

Red was with a group of men just opposite the front corner of the saloon. From where he stood he could observe the approach which Walters' men would naturally use, though he was aware that they would be more likely to come from some other direction. Their idea, as usual, would be to sneak in.

Time passed slowly, and Red knew that daylight could not be more than two hours distant. He fixed his eyes on the trail and kept them there.

At last riders appeared. They came, much to Red's astonishment, openly, and there were as many of them as Red had. Red sent a man through the trees to bring up the other men. They were soon all gathered together but so placed that each man would be able to fire. By that time the riders were nearing the saloon.

Red easily saw that they had come here either to make sure about the punchers who had turned prospectors or else they had come to wipe them out. Red guessed the latter was the idea. He believed that Walters had wanted no fighting or killing near the house, and that the men whom the five punchers had encountered had believed their story. That meant that Walters was not going to let live anyone who had come to the house and had been permitted to leave.

The riders sat their horses in front of the heavy door for a while, apparently thinking themselves secure because of their numbers. Then came a voice : " Hallo, inside !"

Only silence greeted that, and there was another pause. Then a man climbed down from his horse. Red wondered whether he was the smart one. He pounded on the door with his gun, and, again getting no response, he threw the door open. The men among the trees could hear the door fall back heavily.

That man was the smart one, Red was sure. And like all smart Alecks, he was brave when he had men at his back. He stood in the doorway and stared inside.

What he had expected was plain enough. The men who had been at the house would drink first and make camp afterwards. Their drinking would be so prolonged that they would not make camp at all that night; they would sleep on the floor of the saloon.

After his time of staring the man turned his head, and Red supposed he spoke, for several other men climbed down from their horses and went up to him. All went inside. In a moment a slow light appeared beyond a side window. Someone had lighted a central lamp.

Red could picture what those men were seeing. The rough interior, the bar, built long for prospective trade, the glasses from which the punchers had drunk. But not a man in sight!

The light disappeared and the men came out. They stood staring in all directions. There was nothing to be seen. The men mounted, and the horses were started towards the trees. Then suddenly they were turned and ridden down to the bank of the creek. A man, who apparently was looking for sign, dismounted and walked up and down for a way. He remounted and seemed to speak to another man at the head of the group.

The horses were slowly started along the creek bank. Red feared that horses and riders would soon be out of sight.

There was not the slightest reason why he should show mercy to these killers.

He passed the word to the men nearest him and they passed it along. Guns came up. The still night resounded with the echo of the shots. A number of men fell together and others went down one by one. Then other horses dashed into the creek and their riders dropped into the water. Only three men of the original score remained. Two of these seemed to be sorely wounded. There had been no mercy in the first attack, but there was mercy in putting those two out of their misery. Two punchers fired together, and the two slipped from their horses.

The last man was having difficulty in handling his horse. The animal was belly-deep in water and it was trying to escape by rising to its hind legs.

"Let me have him," Red said.

The men said nothing, and Red stepped into the open and walked slowly down to the bank of the creek. When he arrived there, the rider was still fighting his horse. The horse was up and when it came down the man was able to turn it toward the bank. Inevitably he caught sight of Red, but he let the horse go on. His right arm was limp at his side; but he seemed to pay no attention to the wound; and Red, in view of his own experience, gave him credit for courage, though he admitted that perhaps the man had been shot before.

Red's gun was on the man as the horse came clear of the water. The man stopped the horse and sat glaring at Red.

Then he began to curse him in a strangled voice. Red let him continue till he seemed to have no oaths left. He held his hot eyes on Red, expecting him to speak. Red only returned his glare, but Red's eyes were cool.

At last the man broke out: "What the hell you think you're doin', you fool ?"

"Wipin' out as dirty a bunch o' killers as ever drew a gun," Red returned.

"Who, you ? You ain't one o' them——"

"No, I ain't one o' them young punchers you come here to kill. You knowed they was only five an' you expected to find them asleep on the saloon floor. Who delayed you in comin' here ?"

"I dunno what you mean."

Red aimed his gun directly at the man's heart. He said icily: "You better tell me what I wanta know, fella. Who caused the delay ?"

"I did !"

"So you're the smart one ! Well, it didn't do you much good, did it ?"

"Fella, who are you ? You from——"

The man stopped, leaned, and took a deep breath. He said rather faintly: "I'm hurt pretty bad."

"Finish that sentence," Red ordered.

"You from Brinnon ?" the man asked, and his voice was really faint.

"Yes, I'm from Brinnon. I'm Red Starling. An' I'll just tell you that not one o' the men that Walter sent to Brinnon's country is alive."

"My Gawd !" the man breathed.

"And," Red relentlessly went on, "you're the on'y one left of this outfit."

The man began to sway in his saddle, and Red could not decide whether that was from physical weakness or from shock. In any event he had to keep the fellow alive till he got from him what information he had to have. He called to some of the men among the trees, and the entire outfit, including the saloon keeper, came out.

"You had enough men, didn't you ?" the rider jeered.

"Just about as many as you had. I wouldn't risk the lives of any o' them boys, goin' up against an outfit o' killers. You better be polite to them. One o' Walters' men killed a puncher, an', if you know anything, you know what that means."

"Yeh, I know," the man said, and fear shook his voice now.

All the men stopped a short distance from Red and the rider. They said nothing; only their cold eyes were on the man.

"Get off your horse," Red said. "We'll have a look at that wound."

The man almost fell as his feet touched the ground. He

was not a big man but he sat down heavily. Red went up to him, removed his gun, took off his vest and unbuttoned his shirt. His wound was below the shoulder, and blood was coming from it as if his body contained an invisible pump.

"Fella, you're gone," Red said.

The man twisted his head and bent his eyes to get a look at the wound. He stared so hard that he seemed to be trying to penetrate the flesh to see the severed artery.

"Can't you do somethin'?" the man asked.

"Nothin' I know of." He glanced at the punchers. "You fellas know anything about a wound that the blood is jumpin' out of?"

The prospector-punchers knew that the question was not addressed to them. This was something which lay between Red and the men originally with him. It would be a long time before recollection of a puncher's having been killed would pass from the minds of the five.

Red's men greeted the question with a stony silence also.

"Nothin' doin', fella," Red said. "How many men has Walters got left?"

The coma preceding death was already coming to the man. His eyes were half closed and he had difficulty in keeping up his head. His feeling, except for his pain, was only one of growing sleepiness, a sleepiness which was welcome because there would be no pain at all when it overpowered him. He said something indistinguishable. Red had to put a hand under his chin and raise his head and hold it up. He bent.

"How many men has Walters got left?" Red shouted.

The man's eyes flew open. "Lots," he said, and collapsed in Red's suddenly thrust out arms.

Red laid him down. After a while he went to sleep permanently.

CHAPTER XXII

Deserters

Red's first thought was of the riderless horses. He saw them moving along the creek bank, away from the trail which would have carried them back to the long house. However, their instinct would be to return there when they got their bearings, and they must not be allowed to return.

Red sent men for the horses and when they came back a number approached the other horses. They succeeded in surrounding and holding them. Then they took them up. The spokesman for the five suggested that they be corralled where his horse and the horses of his companions were.

"Good idea," Red said. "We'll have to leave some ropes beyond, but I reckon we can spare them."

No long time was required to corral the horses after the other horses had been removed. Red then addressed the men: "I think we got some time. We might as well all have a drink of liquor and somethin' to eat if there's anything in that saloon."

"There's a little," the saloon keeper said. "You're welcome to it. I'm gettin' out o' here pronto. I got a horse wanderin' around some damn place. I'd be obliged if one o' you boys would see if you can take him up."

They drank and ate and then several punchers set out to find the saloon keeper's horse. He was picked up soon, for naturally he would not wander far from the buildings, having long been tamed. The saloon keeper mounted, waved a hand, and set off along the creek bank. He disappeared.

"My gosh," a puncher mourned, "they's mebbe forty drinks apiece in that place, all free as the air you breathe, an' we gotta leave the damn stuff alone."

"Mebbe we can visit here when we get through at that long house," another puncher said hopefully.

"We'll do that for sure. No mebbes."

Red, Ed and the spokesman for the five went into a huddle. The question to be decided was whether men from the house would come here to find out what had happened to the other men. The three men agreed that that was unlikely. The men at the house would be sure that the others had met a force equal to their own and had been taken care of. They would not risk their own precious lives in going to a place where that force might still be.

"We can't go to that house in the daytime," Ed said. "What do we do?"

"I think we better stay right where we are," said Red. "We couldn't find a better place even if them fellas do come. An' we got water an' some food."

The men were questioned and agreed with Red. And so, by turns, they rested through the day, remaining hidden except as one awoke and went down to the creek to drink—and that was frequently.

At nightfall they were ready to ride. When they were mounted, Red said: "If them fellas is waitin' for us to ride in, they'll be expectin' us to come the way them fellas left. I think we better ride north for, say, a mile an' then turn back."

"Good idea, fella," said a puncher.

Red saw that all the men were in fine fettle. They believed they were going to have an easy time finishing their job. Red was not so sure, and he knew he might have to hold them back.

They rode north in the darkness for a mile and then turned back. They were out on the flat, but Red was sure that a creek led to the house. That Easterner who had built

the house would not have done so except where water was handy.

He headed the men in a diagonal course toward the house and presently trees again loomed darkly. The men rode up to them and found themselves in deepest shadow. By comparison there was some light out on the flat. Red kept his eyes on the flat.

The men rode not more than two hundred yards when they saw horses suddenly break out from the darkness. Again the riders seemed equal in number.

" Them fellas is quittin' Walters," Ed said, rather excitedly. " We better get 'em."

" No," Red said. " Let 'em go. They're headin' north. They'll never come back here."

" Yeh, that's right, but to think o' them gettin' away."

" Don't think about it. An' here's somethin' for you: On'y part o' Walters' remainin' outfit ain't leavin'. The hull bunch is. Them other fellas didn't come back, an' they made ready to blow soon's it was dark."

" Mebbe," said Ed, as excitedly as before, " they got Walters with 'em."

Red gazed after the departing riders, now almost out of sight. He didn't believe Walters was with those men. They wouldn't burden themselves with him. He expressed that to Ed, and Ed, rather reluctantly agreed.

" All we gotta do is to go to the house, cautious, o' course, an' get Walters," Red concluded.

" Cautious, you bet," Ed said.

They went on till they were no more than a quarter of a mile from the house, and, suddenly because they could see only a few feet, there were two blurred shapes in front of them. The shapes, Red made out, were those of horses and riders. The larger body of riders must have become visible to the two in the same fraction of a second.

The horses were thrown out of the darkness onto the flat by expert hands. Guns came out all along the line of men. Red yelled: " Don't shoot! They don't dare. Ed, come on! We'll rope 'em."

They sped their horses after the two riders now a little way out on the flat. Red, for two reasons, wanted no firing. The house was too close. Walters might be back there, though he might be one of these two. If he were back there, Red wanted him to have no warning. And he wanted to talk to at least one of these men.

The race of the four horses was even up for a while, and then Ed and Red began to gain. They loosed their ropes and whirled them. The two men must have heard Red's shout, for they bent low in their saddles. Even so, a successful shot with a loop was not impossible. Both Red and Ed were about to cast when the two men lay along the horses so that roping

them did become impossible. Red and Ed spurred their horses and gained a little.

"Stop," Red yelled, "or you can have bullets instead of loops. Take your choice."

One of the men turned his head so that his face was dimly visible. Red kept close watch of him, for he was aware that the men were riding in panic; and in panic they might try to use their guns.

They did not. The one man slowed his horse and in a half circle, turned him. He was thus behind Red. Red wheeled his horse about, and drew his gun. The man had stopped his horse and had lifted his hands.

"Keep 'em there," Red ordered and looked after Ed and the other rider.

Those horses were side by side and Red saw Ed reach out a hand and seize the bridle of the second horse. Red returned to his man. "Runnin' away, was you?" Red asked. "Quittin' Walters, huh?"

"It was the on'y thing to do," the man panted. "My gosh, a lotta men rode an' didn't come back. What was we to do?"

"What you done so far?"

"Nothin' at all. Honest, we ain't. We just been hangin' around the house. That outfit I spoke about went out to get some young punchers that had rode in an'——"

"Just a minute," Red said, for he had seen that Ed and the other man were coming up.

When they arrived, Ed disarmed both men.

"What delayed you two?" Red asked.

"Why, we had trouble gettin' gear on our horses," the man whom Red had taken up answered. "This horse of mine wouldn't take the bit an'——"

"I see," Red jeered, "an' your sidekickers wouldn't wait for you."

"Yeh, the skunks. They run off an' left us. You got a lotta men. Why didn't you blow hell outa them?"

"Because they were friends of yours, I reckon."

"Huh? Why that wouldn't make no diff'runce to you."

Red saw that these two were as stupid as Molliter and Blinky had been. What the one had said about their having been inactive was probably true.

"All right," Red said. "Now, how many more men is at the house?"

"Nobody but Walters."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. My good gosh, first an' last Walters has had an army. There was a dude that went south. There was a wise guy that went over to that little ghost town. Then there was lots of other men an' them that just rode away. Walters had on'y a few at first, I hear, but when things got tough he kept sending out for more."

"What shape is Walters in?"

"I dunno. I ain't seen him never. He keeps hisself in the house. That dude was a man that went in to see him first an' then that wise guy."

"You think he knows you fellas have gone?"

"He shore don't! All them fellas that left ahead of us got away quiet. Our horses fought some, enough to keep us back, but we didn't make no noise an' they didn't make much."

"You don't know where Walters is, then—in what part of the house?"

"Nope."

"I do," the second man put in.

"Where?" Red asked. "An', listen, don't try to pull anything off."

"Not me! Well, I ain't been where Walters is, but whenever that dude went in to see Walters in the night an' that fresh guy after the dude had left went in, a light come on upstairs. You know how that house is built?"

"Yeh."

"Well, seems like Walters occupies the rooms upstairs. He ain't never been down that I know of."

"Who took his meals up to him?"

"Well, he's got a cook. You'll prob'ly find him nappin' in the kitchen. The kitchen is right below Walters' rooms. You won't have no trouble with him."

"You think Walters knows that the men who went over to the ghost town didn't come back?"

"Mister, I don't b'l'eve he does. That smart fella on'y went in to see him once a night an' not at all in the daytime. He'd go up about ten o'clock, just before Walters turned in, I reckon."

"Have you heard any talk about Walters?"

"Not a word. Them fellas never said nothin' when they come out after seein' him."

"I think you ain't tol' us everything," said Red. "You ain't tol' us about them men hidin' in the grass an' trees up there around the house."

"Men hidin'? Honest to Gawd, mister, there ain't a man left around the house or inside it but Walters an' the cook. I know! You think I ain't kept my eyes open? You think I was gonna find myself alone up there when men has been goin' away an' not comin' back?"

"Get to hell outa here!" Red said sharply.

"You mean it?"

"You heard me. An' keep goin'. If you meet up with any of them fellas, tell 'em distance is the thing."

"We won't meet up with 'em. They won't stop till they're miles away. They been shiverin' all through the day for fear somebody'd come."

The two men turned their horses slowly. They rode for a little way with faces turned back. Then they righted their bodies in the saddles and put spurs to their horses. They were soon lost in the darkness.

"We better get up to the house before the moon comes up," Ed said.

They two rejoined the other men and they continued till they were just below the long house. There was no light in it, either in the rooms supposed to be occupied by Walters or in the kitchen.

Leaving their horses below, the men climbed up till they were within twenty-five feet of the house.

Even after the moon rose, they had to continue their waiting till it was sufficiently high in the sky to flood all the grounds. At last the part of the house just beyond them and the ground on this side were revealed.

Red did not think that special care was needed, so far as Walters was concerned. Walters supposed that men were all about, below; and he would not be able, from his window to distinguish between Red and the punchers and the crooks he had hired.

"Let's walk around," Red said in an ordinary tone.

They walked around and found no one. Red felt an air of desertion all over the place, and it was a chill air. Those men might have lied; Walters might have fled with the first who had gone.

"I'll go in an' see the cook," he said, when they were again assembled at the spot to which they had come up.

"Takin' a few of us with you," Ed said.

"I'll be one," young Warren stated.

Red looked at him and realized that he had not paid much attention to him lately. The boy was cold, Red saw, and Red realized what filled his heart and his mind. He was near Walters. He was going to kill him. Hell, Red inwardly exploded, that wasn't so good. Walters might not be so easy to deal with if he were in a room upstairs.

"You two come along," Red said.

A back porch, screened and with a door in one end, was at the back of the house. The three went up to the door and found it latched on the inside. Red poked his gun barrel through the screen and lifted the latch. He saw that there was a row of small windows looking into the kitchen. He tiptoed up to one and peered within. Moonlight flooded the room, and he saw a fat man asleep in a chair, his hands clasped on his paunch. He slept so profoundly that his head was rolled over nearly to one shoulder.

Red, followed by Warren and Ed, moved up to the door leading into the room. The cook seemed to have been satisfied to latch the screen, for this door was unlocked. Red opened it and the three went inside. He walked over to the cook and

shook him awake, holding his other hand ready to clap on the man's mouth if he should start to utter a sound. But the cook was too amazed, possibly too terrified, to move his lips. He simply lolled in the chair, staring up at Red.

"Keep your mouth shut and nothin' will happen to you," Red said. "Get up an' follow me outside."

The cook rose ponderously and did as he was bidden. Red left him in charge of a puncher and then told the other men to enter the house with him. They filed through the kitchen, Red, Ed and Warren in the lead, and entered the living room.

Red was amazed at the length of that room. It had windows at both ends and all along the front. The moonlight entered at only one end but Red could make out more seats of various kinds than he had ever before seen assembled. He moved a little and stepped on a rug. He thought he was going to sink through it. He stooped and lifted a ccrner and was astonished at the weight.

If the fella who had built this house could afford to furnish it like this, what in hell kind of a palace did he live in when he was at home?

However, Red could not lose time in wondering at what to him was magnificence. He saw that there was a row of doors at the rear of the room, and he was able to guess that these led into bedrooms.

He did not want to waste time searching all those rooms, and he stationed a man at the side of each door. Anybody who came out would get a warm welcome.

Now Red saw that a stair led up to the rooms which Walters was supposed to occupy. It ran along the wall for half its way and then it turned and continued to a landing. Beyond that landing Red could just make out a door. He guessed this led into the room where Walters was.

Well, what about young Warren?

Red turned cautiously and finally found the boy. His face was lifted. He was staring at that landing.

Slowly he moved toward the foot of the stairs, his gun in his right hand.

"Son," Red merely breathed.

Walters could not have heard that, Red was sure, but he might be able to hear a louder sound; and since Warren paid no attention to it, Red went toward him. They met at the foot of the stairs.

"Son, let's talk this matter over," Red said.

"There ain't nothin' to talk over," Warren whispered. "The man that killed my father is up there. You think I ain't been wise to everything? Why, I just been livin' for this minute. I gotta blow that fella to hell."

He had not looked at Red. He had kept his eyes on the landing. Red had not dared to lay a hand on him, and he did

not dare lay a hand on him when he put a foot on the lower step.

Red, rather helplessly, turned to the other men, now behind him. They had nothing to offer. The boy, their stillness and silence seemed to say, was in the right.

Warren went on. He reached the landing. He stood directly in front of the door. He put his hand on the latch.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Second Time

Warren suddenly threw open the door, and the men saw him spring into the room. They expected an immediate development, but there was nothing. The door stood open for perhaps thirty seconds. Then it was softly, slowly closed.

"The boy wants to pull the hull thing off by hisself," a puncher grumbled. "I sh'd think he'd be satisfied to take Walters up. He could put a hand to a rope. He'd be payin' Walters back thataway."

Neither Red or Ed was satisfied with the quiet closing of that door. It had been the act of one more mature than the Warren boy, if the boy had got the drop on Walters. The two men knew that Warren had been boiling all the time, waiting for his chance at Walters. If he had caught Walters, they were convinced, he would not have been in control of himself to close that door. He would probably have put a quick bullet into Walters.

"Let's pile up there an' see what's goin' on," a puncher suggested.

"No!" said Red sharply. "Somethin's gone wrong. My Gawd, we were a bunch o' fools to let Warren have his way. Here! Somebody run an' ask that cook whether Walters is really up there."

The puncher nearest the door ran outside, ran back. He reported that the cook had said that Walters had been upstairs the last the cook had known anything about it.

"He's up there all right," Red said, "an' what's happened to the boy nobody knows."

Someone else started to speak and then silence gripped the whole group. The door was being opened as slowly as it had been closed. The men waited for an appearance. There was no appearance but a voice floated down.

It was not Warren's voice.

"I require to be told just what the situation is. If I don't get what I want, I'll kill this stubborn boy."

Red snatched at that word "stubborn." It disclosed that Warren had refused to give Walters any information. The rest proved that Warren still lived. But Walters was master

of the situation. He was outnumbered, but all these men below him were helpless. The men cursed in undertones.

"Well?" Walters said.

Red found his voice strange. There was no trace of excitement in it. He might have been speaking indifferently on an unimportant subject.

"Whatcha want first?" Red huskily asked.

"Where are all my men?"

"Some dead, the rest gone."

"The cowards," said Walters. And then after a pause: "How many men down there?"

"More'n twenty."

"Where are your horses?"

"Down on the flat."

"You will go down to them and ride away."

"He'll kill the boy anyhow," Ed said.

Red did not know whether that was true or not. As he hesitated Warren's voice came to him clearly: '"Don't do nothin' he says, Red. He thinks he's smooth. He ain't givin' up on that Brinnon business. He's got a pile o' money to hire new hands. He showed it to me. He says he'll never give up that girl."

"Son, we gotta get you outa this," Red said.

"Don't mind about me, Red. I fell down on my job. I thought I was gonna pull off somethin' big. He was waitin' for me, hid behind a curtain. You had me found while I stood behind the door. You gotta go through, Red."

That required courage on Warren's part, Red knew, but it did no good. There was any quantity of courage down here, but it also seemed useless. So far Red and then the men had come through by the simple act of riding straight in, but, again, that was useless here. In fact it was impossible. Brains seemed to be needed, but the brains of all these hardy men produced nothing.

"Who's in charge down there?" Walters queried.

"Me, Red Starling."

"*Red* Starling? Oh!"

Red saw that Walters had figured out that Red was red-headed and that there might have been confusion between him and Red Considine. Walters followed that line, and he showed he was going to conceal nothing. He was going to depend entirely upon his having Warren prisoner.

"What happened to all the men I sent out—at first, I mean."

"All dead," Red answered.

"So!" Walters' voice climbed to a higher pitch. "And you were responsible for some of those deaths, Red Starling."

"Yes. I killed Considine, for one."

"Did you, indeed?" Walters asked. "I have a right to kill Warren then."

Red perceived that Walters had Warren foul all right. He had made the boy even give him his name.

"I don't think you're goin' to kill the boy," Red said. "Whatcha think will happen to you if you do?"

"Oh, I could put a bullet into myself."

That was a facer. Red guessed that Walters was just the kind of man to kill himself to prevent his falling into the hands of his enemies. But before he did that, Warren would be lying dead on the floor.

"Well, whatcha want, Walters?" Red asked.

"I've told you. You haven't forgotten."

"We ain't gonna ride away," Red stated, experimentally.

"Suit yourself. If you wish to sacrifice the boy merely to salve your own pride, go ahead."

"Couldn't you an' me talk this over, fella?" Red asked.

"That would be no good. I'm going to ride away from here a free man."

There was a moment of silence, and then that was broken by sounds from which the men below could gather nothing. "Did you hear that?" Walters asked.

"Yeh," Red said, and he felt that the blood in his veins had gone to water and that his heart had ceased to function.

"Warren is lying on the floor. He tried to spring on me. I had been expecting that. I poked my gun barrel into his face and then struck him down."

"Will you call everything off for a minute, Walters?" Red asked.

"For a minute."

"Have you killed the boy?"

Walters laughed and then he said: "You fool, do you think I'd tell you if I had killed him? Figure it out for yourself."

"Lemme come up there an' see for myself?" Red said.

"I'll think that over. Give me a little time. I have everything in my hands. I intend to keep it there."

Red was afraid that Walters had killed Warren. He wanted time to decide what his next move would be. Still he was as safe as if Red knew that Warren still lived. Ignorance here was anything but bliss.

"Would you like to come up without a gun on your person, Starling?" Walters asked.

"Don't do it, Red," Ed whispered. "I b'l'eve the boy is dead. Now the fella wants to get hold o' you, to take Warren's place."

"What's the matter, Starling?" Walters demanded. "Are you afraid? I thought you were a man of great courage."

"I'm comin' up," Red said. "If you like, you can step out on the landin' an' see me hand over my guns. I been wearin' two."

"Step out on the landing and be riddled," Walters scoffed. "I don't need to see you transfer your guns. I'll be waiting

for you when you appear in the doorway, and you won't see me."

"Here I come," Red said. He faced the men for an instant: "If the boy is dead, I'll let you know. If he is, let things ride. Get Walters. Never mind about me."

The men were silent, and Red knew that they would not do what he ordered them to do. He said fiercely: "You hear me? I gotta find out just the one thing about Warren. If he's dead, you'll be free. Pump lead into that fella till there ain't nothin' left o' him. Warren wanted to get him account his father. I wanted to get him account——"

He stopped. For the first time in quite a while he thought of Sue. It was probable that she would never see him again. She had been game all the way through. She had, of course, been afraid for him, but she hadn't let on—at least not much. And yet she would want him to do what he was about to do.

"Coming, Starling?" Walters called down.

Red handed over his guns to Ed. He said: "Use one o' them guns to kill that sucker, Ed." Then he began to mount the stairs. A thick carpet ran from top to bottom, and Red's feet sank into it. However, his spurs jingled. "Here me comin' up, Walters?" he asked. "Hear my spurs?"

"I hear you," Walters answered. "And remember this, fellow. Unless you're unarmed, I'll kill you out of hand. I'll still have the boy. Appear in the doorway with your hands high."

"All right," Red said.

He gained the top of the stairs. He turned toward the door. He looked into the moonlight-flooded room.

Warren lay on the floor. Walters was not in sight. He spoke, however: "Come in, Starling."

Red lifted his hands and entered the room. Walters ordered him to turn his back, and when he did so, Walters said: "I'm coming up to you to search you. I'll have my gun on you. Don't try anything, fellow. You're a killer. I can become one."

Red heard Walters approach him. He shivered all through his body as Walters' hands went over his clothing. Satisfied, Walters stepped back.

"Can I have a look at that boy?" Red asked.

"Why, yes. Wait! I think I'll make a light."

Red guessed that the place must be equipped with a new kind of lamp, for a second after Walters struck a match, there was a brilliant light in the room.

Slowly Red turned about. Walters was standing across the room. The man's face was ghastly from fear, and Red wondered that he had been able to control himself as well as he had done. But Red wanted only one thing: To discover whether Warren still lived. He walked up to the body and knelt. Warren's lips were cut where Walters had poked his

gun against them. Red felt of his head. There was a scalp wound with some drying blood. Red moved along a little as if he wanted to examine the head more closely. That placed his body between Walters and the head. " Son, speak to me," Red said loudly, dramatically, as if he had found a sorely wounded lad who might never speak to him again.

Warren instantly opened his eyes to the full, as quickly closed them.

" Well, is he dead ?" Walters, behind Red, snapped.

" No. You never can tell how a blow like that will result, though."

" It doesn't matter " Walters declared.

This room was not large. Walters was no more than six feet from Red. All Red wanted was a brief diversion, and he would have to depend upon Warren to create that. So he must signal Warren when he was ready. It was a tough proposition to co-ordinate everything.

" Well, mebbe you've killed a young boy, Walters," Red said.

" And I'll kill you."

" That boy would have fought you to a standstill. That's what he came up here for. Why, you——"

Red took a forward step, a short one ; but he was now close enough to Walters for his purpose. Walters menaced him with his gun. " Don't take another step," he said, and his face was bloodless from an intention to kill.

" I guess you got me," Red said, and he let his body appear to droop, though in fact he drew it together, and that strong body became ready for action. Then he said, and it was his signal to Warren : " I wish that boy was awake to help me.

Warren's response was instant. As wild a scream as ever issued from human lips came from his.

Walters, his eyes the eyes of a man gone mad, turned momentarily toward the boy.

Red threw himself forward, his head down. His head struck Walters in the stomach. The man fell back, dropped to the floor, and Red threw himself upon him.

But Walters had retained his gun and he pulled the trigger. The bullet entered Red's shoulder, again on the left side. The whole side seemed paralyzed. The fact was that the bullet had struck a nerve centre, and if Red had been less strong he would have been sent into unconsciousness.

He had, so far as he had been able, prepared for every move in advance. Two moves were most important : One was to do what he had already done, and the other was to get the gun. He seized the gun. Perhaps fear on Walters' part had something to do with his being able to wrest it from Walters' graesp. He slid from Walters' body and got to his knees, desperate, Walters snatched at the gun.

Red pulled at the trigger. Dizziness assailed him. By

Gawd, he'd get to his feet this time. No little wound, no wound inflicted by Walters, would put him down. He rose halfway. He realized that Walters lay still beneath him. Dead! Yeh, the man that had fought Brinnon as a crook fights and so had fought Sue, was gone. Also Warren was coming toward him. That was all. He pitched down.

He came to slowly. He had really been unconscious only a few minutes, but to him it was a long time. Someone was opening up his clothing. He opened his eyes and saw Warren near him among the other men. Well, Warren was all right.

A puncher was kneeling beside him, trying to expose his wound. He succeeded and a little gasp escaped him. He said: "Kinda bad."

Kinda bad! Red snorted. They weren't going to baby him. Why, the wound was nothing. Just nothing!

"Get away from me," he snapped.

The puncher, astonished, straightened up. Red found that he was lying on the living room floor. He sat up, put his good hand on the floor, and tried to rise. He couldn't make it. "Gimme a hand," he said.

"You're hurt," the puncher protested. "You're hurt a lot worse'n you was the last time."

"To hell with it! Just gimme a hand."

The puncher helped him to his feet. The wall seemed a long way off, but he managed to stagger to it and lean up against it. "I can't roll a cigarette," he said.

He could have had a score of cigarettes within the next five seconds. With a lighted one hanging from his lips, he said: "Look to the boy. I wanta make sure he ain't got a cracked skull."

Warren started to protest, but punchers hushed him with violent looks. One presently reported: "On'y a cut on his lips and one on his head."

"Wash 'em out," Red ordered. "Get that cook in an' make him heat up a lotta water."

Men who thought that Red might be touched in the head a little hastened to obey. That damn fool would have to have his own wound attended to pretty quick.

At last he was in the kitchen having the wound attended to. That gave him no pleasure.

"Cook, you can get outa here," he said, "or you can stay if you wanta."

"Me, I'll be goin' when I feed all you fellas."

Red thought of the five thousand dollars which Brinnon had. To hell with it! Brinnon could do whatever he wanted to with it.

"Red, you gotta get some rest," Ed said. "This'll be a fine place to rest."

"Me, I'm ridin', come about ten o'clock in the mornin',"

Red said. "Well, mebbe noon. I gotta be at Brinnon's soon after nightfall. I got a piece to speak to that old fella."

"You won't be able to ride for sev'rul days."

"I won't? You watch me."

"Will you go to bed now?"

"Shore. Everybody better get some sleep."

"We will."

"You wait a minute," said the cook, busy at the stove. "I'm fixin' some coffee an' food for that man. He needs somethin' to brace him up. I'm gettin' some broth hot. It'll go through him like nine drinks o' whisky."

That proved true. Red had never known coffee and steaming food so to pick him up. When he had finished, he rose. He was unsteady but no one offered to help him.

He got to one of the bedrooms and suffered Ed to remove his boots and some of his clothing. He lay back. Suffering cats, what a bed. Why, there was springs that a man could bounce up to the ceiling from. And pillows. Not just a pillow. Why, my good gosh, a man could smother himself in them. Soft! Softer than a south wind blowing easy.

Red took a slow, deep breath. Ed had left the room. Red had not heard him go. Soft! Everything was soft. Sleep was coming on stealthy feet.

"See you soon, Sue," Red murmured. "I ain't hurt much. I'll be ridin' in the mornin' . . . noon. . . ."

He rode at noon and arrived at Brinnon's when the moon was brightly shining. Brinnon came to meet him and the other men. He didn't even look at Brinnon.

Sue was in the doorway, lamplight behind her. He got off his horse by himself and walked, a little unsteadily, up to her. She held out both hands and drew him into the house. No one else was in the room.

Sue closed the door.

THE END